



Funding for the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program NEA Jazz Master interview was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

LOUIE BELLSON
NEA Jazz Master (1994)

Interviewee: Louie Bellson (July 6, 1924 – February 14, 2009)
Interviewer: Anthony Brown with recording engineer Ken Kimery
Date: October 20-21, 2005
Repository: Archives Center, National Museum of American History,
 Smithsonian Institution
Description: Transcript, pp. 116

Transcriber's note: inaudible words are marked "[?]".

Brown: Today is October 20th, 2005. We are in the home of musician-percussionist-humanitarian extraordinaire Louie Bellson at his home in San Jose, California. We are in his lovely home with his lovely wife, Francine, and we are conducting the official Smithsonian Institution Jazz Oral History interview with the incomparable maestro Louie Bellson.

Louie, this oral history is an attempt to capture your life in music, for you to tell the story of your life in your own words. We'd like to start at the very beginning [and] have you talk about your early childhood, your family, and then progress through your career.

The reason why we are particularly interested in your interview is because of the breadth of your accomplishments not only as a percussionist virtuoso, but also because of your involvement as an arranger, as a composer, as an educator, and as a humanitarian. These are some of the topics we hope to be able to bring to life during the discussion of your life in music.

So, Louie Bellson, if you could start by giving us your full – your very full name – your original name from birth. I know that there are several discrepancies, and it's probably very long, but if you could do that and give us the exact date of your birth and location.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: It was in the magazines for years. Leonard Feather had it 26 of July, but it's really July 6th. I was born Luigi Paulino Alfredo Francesco Antonio Balassoni. With that I could [?] the cello and play it. But that's my full name. The reason it was changed, because Dad had a music store at home. Nobody could really think of all those names, and they misspelled Balassoni. So that's why it became Louis Bellson or Louie Bellson.

Brown: What year were you born?

Bellson: 1924.

Brown: What city or town?

Bellson: Rock Falls, Illinois. Rock Falls, Illinois, is about 90 miles from Chicago. I was 13 1/2 pounds when I was born. Like Francine says, that's where I got the double bass drums. 13 1/2 pounds. That's a big baby. That's a giant of a baby. My dad was big. My mother was small. So I got the smallness from my mom, and the bigness in my hands and feet from my dad.

Brown: Can you tell us about your childhood? Do you remember the address of the home where you were born or where you lived first, originally lived?

Bellson: Yes. It's amazing. They located the house where I was born. It's 708 Eighth Street, Rock Falls, Illinois. It's 706.

Brown: Francine is allowing us to correct that.

Bellson: 706. That's my birthday. 706 is my birthday.

Brown: Okay. 706.

Bellson: They located the house, and three years ago we started a festival there, where I play with a big band and do a seminar, have a drum contest. This is the fourth year coming up. Rock Falls, Illinois. They have a marker in the front stating that I was born July 6th, 1924.

Brown: So that's where you lived as a child? That's where you grew up? At that house?

Bellson: Only when I was a real small child. I'd say by the time I was 11 or 12 years old, I had moved to Peoria, Illinois, and then to Moline, Illinois, where I really grew up. Went to high school there, junior high school. That's where I started playing.

Brown: Let's back up. Could you tell us your parents' full names?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: My dad is Louis, Sr. My mother's name was Carmen. That's the American name, Carmen.

Brown: Do you remember their Italian names?

Bellson: Yes. My dad was Louis Balassoni. My mother was Carmen Bartolucci.

Brown: Bartolucci?

Bellson: Bartolucci.

Brown: Do you know where they were from in Italy?

Bellson: My father was born in Naples. My mother was born in Milano. So I'm half Milanese and half Napolitan.

Brown: Are they both first generation or second generation in America?

Bellson: Second, I think?

Brown: So they were born in America?

Bellson: Yeah. No, they're first generation, born in Italy. They came over. Our family – we had eight children, four girls and four boys. The girls came first. Four of the girls were my mother's sister's. Have I got that right?

Brown: Francine, do you want to make an editorial comment here?

Bellson: Dad was married to my mother's sister.

Brown: Why don't you stop. Let's get some clarity.

[recording interrupted]

Louie, if you could tell us about your siblings. Tell us about your early family recollections.

Bellson: There were eight children altogether. All the girls came first, and then the boys came second. But the first three girls were from my dad's first marriage to his wife who came from Italy with him. Those three girls – his wife passed away, so my dad sent to Italy for the sister. When the sister came to America, they had five children: one girl and four boys. So actually Josephine, Dee Dee, and Edie are my half-sisters. Mary is my full sister. And of course the four boys.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Brown: Do you remember the names of your brothers?

Bellson: Yes. The oldest brother was Frank. He passed away. The oldest girl was Edie. She passed away. The rest of us are still around. That's Tony. He's younger than me. Henry is the baby of the boys. Josephine, Dee Dee, and Mary are the girls left.

Brown: You were born in one place in Illinois. Then you moved to Peoria. Then you moved to Moline. Do you have any recollections of Peoria?

Bellson: Yes. My dad worked for Bierly Brothers' music store. He had not gotten his own music store yet. He just taught there. We were there for about five years. Then we moved to Rock Island and then Moline. Finally my dad got his own music store.

When I was – I'm backing up – when I was three years old, that's when my dad took me to a parade. When that drum section passed me by, I said, "That's what I want to play." My dad said my little finger pointed right at the drums. I was so definite that he started me at three-and-a-half years old.

Brown: Your father was a professional musician?

Bellson: He played all instruments and taught all instruments.

Brown: He came from Italy as a musician?

Bellson: Right.

Brown: Do you know anything about his training in Italy, how he became a musician?

Bellson: He knew every aria from every opera. He studied – I was a legit performer myself. When they call me a jazz drummer, I smile, because I was brought up with the opera – all the opera [?], and classical music. Of course, Dad having a music store, I got all the records – the jazz records that came in from Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Lionel Hampton, Cab Calloway. I knew all those records when I was a kid.

Brown: Francine said earlier that you only spoke Italian when you were a bambino. So Italian was spoken in the house?

Bellson: Yeah, we spoke Italian all the time, because my parents didn't understand English too much, so we spoke Italian. I spoke very fluently when I was a kid, but now I forgot it all, because after being on the road 50 years – or 70 years now – if I don't talk to anybody, you lose it. But I still know all the cuss words.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Brown: You remember the important things.

Can you talk about any recollections of your childhood, about the neighborhood? Was it an Italian neighborhood and therefore it was easy to continue to speak Italian? Did you have trouble going to school when you went to school and didn't speak much English? How was it? What recollections do you have of your neighborhood and schooling?

Bellson: Rock Falls, they had a large Italian settlement there. In fact my dad used to go there just to give lessons. Most of the people were poor. They paid him off by giving him home-grown tomatoes, home-grown wine – grapes. That's what happened.

My recollection of Peoria – we didn't stay there too long. My dad opened a restaurant. [?] ate up all of our profits, so he decided to give it up. That didn't last long at all. From Peoria we moved to Rock Island for a few years. Then we finally got to Moline. Dad had his own music store, full fresh music store. He taught everything there: string instruments, brass instruments, woodwinds, percussion. We had all the teachers there. It was a class A music store.

Brown: Did you start taking lessons in your dad's music stores, or did you study with a private teacher elsewhere?

Bellson: I studied with my father first. I did about a year with him. Then he said, "I can't teach you anything more." So I went to Chicago to study with Roy Knapp. Remember Roy Knapp? He taught Gene Krupa. Buddy [Rich] took a few lessons with him too. When I went to study with Roy, he had me play something on the drum set. He said, "I can't teach you anything. You know it all already." I said, "No, no, no." So he started me on xylophone, marimba, and vibes. He started me on harmony and theory. I branched off after Dad started me and I took over with Roy Knapp. By the time I was 13, 14, 15 years old, I was teaching in my dad's music store. That's where all these books came from. Most of my students were – I was 13. My students were 40 years old, 50 years old.

Brown: Let's back up. You studied with your dad for a year. You pointed at the drummer in the parade and said you wanted to play drums. So your father started teaching you shortly thereafter?

Bellson: Yeah.

Brown: Started giving you lessons? Snare drum lessons, I imagine? Or full kit? Bass drum? Anything else other than . . . ?

Bellson: Snare drum first. A parade drum too, at that, because he believed in going up through the ranks. That don't spoil me, by giving me a brand new set of drums. He could

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

have got me a set for nothing. He said, “No. You can work for it.” So I had a parade with gut snares in the bottom. You know what that means. Mistakes come out loud and clear.

When I studied with Roy – when I played for Roy, Roy said, “I can’t teach you anything on the drums. I’m going to get you on the mallets and tympani.”

Brown: How old were you when you went to study with Roy?

Bellson: I was about 15, 16 years old. I’d take a train, go to Chicago. What I would do is take my lesson from Roy, stay over a couple of days, and of course catch Gene at the Panther Room at the Hotel Sherman, or go to the theater and see Cab Calloway, go back and see a little Cozy Cole, and catch all the – Jo Jones with Basie’s band. Never missed that.

But my early training in Moline – I was very fortunate that there was a nightclub there called the Rendezvous nightclub. The four players there were all from Kansas City. The leader was Specks [Speckled] Red. He came from Des Moines, Iowa. But Argo Percy Walker was from Kansas City – Jo Jones style. Steiner was the saxophone player. Bates was the bass player. Every Tuesday night they let me play the whole night with that quartet. That’s where I learned what swing was all about. They taught me how to play for soloists, how to back up a band – big band, small band. Then with my dad, I played every night in the music store. He had an accordion band. I played drums with the accordion band. He had woodwinds on Wednesday night. Thursday night was a brass section. Friday night was a full band. I was there playing drums all the time. That was valuable training. That helped me so much, because by the time I got to be 18, 19 years old, I could play with any band.

Brown: What was your favorite type of music that you liked to listen to?

Bellson: All kinds of music, because I was geared to that in the music store. Somebody would come in and say, “I want something by Stravinsky.” I’d get the book out, get the records out. That’s how I learned classical music.

Brown: Did you learn any other instruments, other than percussion instruments?

Bellson: My dad directed me to the piano, not as a piano player, but to learn theory, harmony, and rhythm. As I started doing that, I got involved in writing for ensembles – for string quartets and eventually with a big band. So today, when I bring in a new chart .

..

[recording interrupted]

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



I just finished a brand new chart for a big band. I can rehearse it myself. I don't have to ask somebody to rehearse it for me. I can pick out the bad notes. I look at my score. The title of it is *Opus No. 6*. It's for the band at Musician's Warehouse, where I play with them twice a month. When I'm down in L.A., I have my own band. I play with them twice a month. That keeps my chops up, because you have to play. I have to play all the time. Otherwise you lose it. We all know that.

Brown: We going to talk a lot about your arranging, but perhaps now's the time to start about how you began to become interested in being an arranger. Here you are a percussionist. Your father is a musician, owns a music store. You're surrounded by music. About your household – obviously you're a musician, and your father's a musician. Were your siblings as well? Did they pursue music?

Bellson: Yes. There are two other drummers in the family: Tony and Hank. But we all started on string instruments: mandolin, guitar, guitar[?] – the big bass guitars. That didn't stay long. All three of us got involved with drums. It's a natural thing.

Brown: What was the first string instrument you played?

Bellson: Mandolin.

Brown: You played mandolin.

Bellson: Then guitar. That was good, because with playing the piano, actually that gave me the full spectrum. Guitar, full chords. Piano, full chords. So that's when I learned how to write.

Brown: Did you start writing your own compositions?

Bellson: Yes.

Brown: At what age do you remember writing your first composition?

Bellson: About 14.

Brown: Do you remember what kind of tune it was, or what it was? Was it a string quartet, or was it a pop tune?

Bellson: The first arrangement I wrote was a thing called *Little Sireco* [spelling?]. I wrote it for big band. When I think about that – that arrangement was kind of lousy, but I had to go through that phase. I had a chance to listen to all those bands. That's what really gave me the incentive. Then working with Specks Red on Tuesday nights, that taught me how to swing, how to play music.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Brown: When you say Specks Red, Specks Red's band, was it a black band? white band? mixed band?

Bellson: Black band, yeah.

Brown: Black band. There was no trouble with you playing with the black band?

Bellson: No. In fact, [Harry] Sweets [Edison] used to call me Dusty Foot. He said, "You're not Italian. You're a Dusty Foot." [? ?] "You're Arapahoe." Okay. Jo was a real character, but I learned an awful lot from him.

Brown: How old were you when you met him?

Bellson: I was about – I was in Benny Goodman's band. I went to catch Basie's band. He was with Basie's band. He heard me play. He said, "You and I are going to be playing lots of stuff together in the near future." Sure enough, it happened that way.

Brown: We're getting a little ahead of ourselves if you're already talking about being with the Goodman band, so let's back up. You're still in high school. You're studying. You've been studying with Roy Knapp. How long did you study with Roy?

Bellson: With Roy Knapp? I studied with him for about three years. I gained a lot of knowledge, and it gave me a chance to go to Chicago, take my lesson from him, then stay over a day or two, and like I said before, go to catch Cab Calloway, Gene Krupa, Tommy Dorsey, Duke, Basie. I caught all of them.

Brown: The biography in *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* lists that you learned tap-dancing, or were a tap-dancer with a barrelhouse pianist, Speckled Red. You said that you played with him. Did you also – is that an accurate account? Were you also a tap dancer?

Bellson: All the drummers during that era – Jo Jones, for example, Buddy Rich – Steve Gadd was a Mouseketeer. They all tap-danced. They told jokes. Because when you played the theaters, you did everything. You were m.c. You had a dance routine. You had a dance routine called a b.s. chorus. It was nothing but a series of taps. That's how Baby Lawrence, Teddy Hale, Bunny Briggs – that's where all those guys came up, from the tap-dance era.

My sister Mary – full sister – taught me how to tap-dance. She taught me the time-step first of all, and then the shim-sham-shimee. That's how that started.

Brown: How old were you when she was teaching you this?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bellson: 13 or 14. I did pretty good. That's why two bass drums came in handy, because this left foot was strong.

Brown: We're going to talk about that as well. Do you remember your very first professional performance?

Bellson: Yeah. It was in Rock Island, Illinois. The gig was a piano player, a trumpet player, and drums. That's all. No bass. What an odd combination. But they were all good players. So I had to supply what the piano player and bass player would play, as well as doing what I did on my drum set. The trumpet player was excellent. He doubled on flugelhorn. The piano player was very good. Did I say piano? We didn't have bass. We had piano, trumpet, and drums. I had to be escorted into the place, because they sold liquor there. I had an older guy help me set up my drums and stay with me to make sure I didn't go to the bar. That was my first gig.

Brown: How old were you?

Bellson: How old was I? About 14. That gig paid \$3. I played all night for \$3, and I had fun. I was playing music. That trio, we played excerpts from Duke's band, Basie's band, Lionel Hampton. We played *Flying Home*. We played good music. No bad music.

Brown: So before you started studying with Roy, you were already an accomplished – or at least being paid professionally as a musician. Who were some of the drummers that you were listening to? Were there any ones that you could identify and say, oh yeah, he influenced me – he was a strong influence in my development?

Bellson: A lot of them, because, as I said before, I heard them on records. The first record I played when I was a kid, that had a drum solo on it, was Lionel Hampton, *Jack the Bellboy*. He was playing drums, not vibes. He was one hell of a drummer, too. Lionel was a living legend. That's the first record I heard. Then of course along came Gene [Krupa], and I got to know him. He's one of the first guys that brought drums to the foreground, where you couldn't say, "We've got 17 guys and a drummer in the band." I used to say, "What do you mean, 17 guys and a drummer? We're included in that. We're 18." They'd say, "You guys are noisemakers." I said, "No, no, no, no. We're sound-makers, not noisemakers. We're a very important part of the band." Later on we proved it.

Buddy [Rich] and I were almost the same age. He had me by about five years. He was about five years older than me. We pal'd around. We were pals for over 50 years. That was one hell of a drummer too. But this guy up here, Jo Jones, and Big Sid Catlett, were my two teachers, along with Argo Percy Walker at the Rendezvous. They taught me how to play brushes, how to play the hi-hat, how to listen, develop a style, listen to the soloist.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



When you listen to a soloist, you become a background, not a soloist. Then I started listening to Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. That came later. But when I first heard those guys play, I didn't understand it at first, but I knew something special was happening. When I went the second time, I said, aha. I see what they're doing. The third and fourth times, I became a big fan.

Brown: You mention Diz and Bird, but you don't mention the drummers they were playing with. Was it the overall music that got you, and not necessarily the drumming?

Bellson: Both. Overall music and the drumming too, because Kenny – you know who I'm talking about.

Brown: Kenny Clarke. Klook.

Bellson: Kenny Clarke – Klook – was the first guy I heard that played what you call bebop drums. He didn't need a left hand or right foot. It was all here in the right hand. When the syncopation came in with the bass drum, he had it all in the right place. He didn't have to go boom-boom-boom-boom-boom like we had to do in the swing bands, because the bass player played that. Ray Brown gives you four beats. You didn't need anything more after that.

Brown: Let's go back and talk about your influences from the Kansas City drummers, because Kansas City – obviously you always talk about Papa Jo Jones, but there are many people who brought that Kansas City style as well. You mentioned one of those gentlemen earlier. Were you able to distinguish different drumming styles by this time in your career or development?

Bellson: Oh yeah.

Brown: Was there something particular about the Kansas City style of drumming?

Bellson: It had a fluid sound to it. Jo Jones reminded me of a fan dancer. He was all liquid, but yet the intensity was there in his sound. The sound of his drums was like a perfect choir – soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. He made it sound that way. From Jo Jones, that's where Max Roach came from, out of Jo Jones. Jo Jones was like Lester Young. Lester Young started that fluid saxophone. That's where Stan Getz got it. It wasn't like Coleman Hawkins or Ben Webster. They were more of another style. But Pres [Lester Young] had a different style that came out of that Basie band. That's what made Jo so different, a fluid sound, yet with intensity. It made you listen.

Brown: That famous nationwide drum contest that was sponsored by Gene Krupa – talk about that experience.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: I wasn't too interested in joining that contest. I had a funny feeling about contests, because I figured it's based on your performance at that time. You could have done a lot of things prior to that, but faltered in that three or four minutes as a contestant. So I wasn't interested in joining it. The guy at [?] Drum Company said, "Louie, you've got to join this." My dad encouraged me, and I started in. That was local, regional, semi-finals, and finals. The finals were to be held in New York with Gene Krupa's band at the Paramount Theater. But that didn't happen. It was Gene, but it was at Wurlitzer's music store, because Gene was appearing at the Paramount, and people paid to come in to hear him play. They didn't want to hear a bunch of high-school kids playing drums. So we had it at Wurlitzer for the finale.

The local thing was easy, because there weren't too many drummers around then. The regional one was the toughest one. All the Chicago drummers – young drummers from Chicago – I mean, they really played well. When they called my name as the winner, I was surprised, because I heard a hundred drummers out of Chicago that – I thought they cut me, or they played as well as I did, anyway.

But that contest was difficult, because at first we thought we were going to play with Gene Krupa's band. That's wonderful. But instead we had to play along with the record *Drum Boogie*. Remember that? [Bellson sings the theme.] To play along with the record, you've got to be careful. I knew that Gene was going to count on judging us to make sure that we played soft enough to don't lose that rhythm, because there was a drum solo in there too. So I played real soft. I didn't miss a beat. I got a lot of coverage on that. Whereas some of the other drummers started off – you didn't hear the record. All you heard was them, and they were playing long before the record was over with.

It was an interesting – I gained a lot of publicity from that. *Down Beat* gave me a lot of coverage. *Metronome* magazine in those days gave me a lot of coverage. That gave me a lot of publicity, so the name was starting to bounce around.

But it really started when – actually, that contest – my first band that I played with was Ted FioRito.

Brown: Say it again. Ted what?

Bellson: Ted FioRito: F-i-o-capital R-i-t-o. He wrote *I Never Knew*. He was a society bandleader, but a good one. When he came to Davenport, Iowa, all the kids said, "Let Lou play." So I sat in and played. He offered me a job right there. I still had three months of high school to do. I told Ted – I said, "I've got three months of high school. Let me do that first, and if you're still interested . . ." Ted said, "You call me, because I'm going off to California." He kept his word. He said, "By the way, do you know any good girl singers around?" Because Betty Grable sang with him, years ago. Did you know that? I said, "Yeah. I know two girls here. One is a great singer, but she's not dependable. You

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



can't count on her being on time. The other one is not as good as her, but she's a bombshell. Her name is June Stovenour. She was a cheerleader." June Stovenour joined Ted before I did. She later became June Haver. Does that name strike a bell? She married Fred MacMurray. She became a big movie star.

Brown: So you launched her career.

Bellson: Yeah. I came to California. Ted FioRito was in a place called the Florentine Gardens. The Mills Brothers were the main attraction there. You talk about learning something. Harry, [?] – all four of them, actually. Their father was still living. But they were the class act. They taught me more about music than anybody else, being available at Florentine Gardens. It was three months there at Florentine Gardens.

While I was there, they had a pickpocket, a guy by the name of Dr. Giovanni. He had somebody come up, and he'd pick their pockets. He was on the bill. Ted FioRito's band – Candy Candido was with the band.

While I was there, Freddie Goodman – Benny Goodman's brother – came in. Freddie was managing Benny at that time. Benny Goodman was at Paramount Studios doing a movie. When Freddie heard me play, he sent a note for me to come over to the table. I did. He said, "How would you like to join Benny Goodman's band?" I said, "B-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-b." He said, "I'll tell you what. I'm going to pick you up in a limousine. You come down to Paramount Studios and audition for Benny Goodman." I didn't sleep that night at all, because here Ted got me out of Moline, and he's been nice to me. How can I just get up and leave him? But Benny Goodman – man.

So he picked me up the next day in a limousine. Took me out to Paramount Studios. I heard Benny Goodman say, "Tell the kid, put a tuxedo on. I'll see him on the set." No audition at all. I was playing with Dave Barbour on guitar and Jimmie Rowles on piano. I forget who the bass player was. I played one number with the quartet, and Benny Goodman said, "The train leaves Thursday. I'll see you there." That was my audition with Benny Goodman. Isn't that something?

Brown: An amazing story. Did he even talk to you? Did he ever say anything to you?

Bellson: No, he didn't. All he said was, "You've got the job, and I'll see you Thursday on the train."

Now the big question came: how am I going to tell Ted FioRito? Candy Candido and the rest of the band found out about it. They said, "Go to Benny. We'll explain to Ted later on what happened." I said, "Yeah, but I can't do that. Let me at least tell Ted." They said, "No. He's a bull-headed Italian. He's not going to go for it." They said, "You go on ahead. We'll fix it up." So Ted really got mad, but later on, he apologized. He said,

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

“Look kid. I didn’t want to stand in your way.” Benny Goodman was hot in those days. *Sing, Sing, Sing* and all that.

So I went to New York with Benny. My first gig in New York was at the New Yorker Hotel. While we played with the band there, we had a tremendous ice show to play. The band had to play the ice show. The drum book was three inches thick. I had to play tympani cues, xylophone, and drum set. That was my meat. I could breeze through that. All the ice skaters said, “Keep him with you all the time.” But for some reason, on the show I had to play *Sing, Sing, Sing*, and I got a lot of applause for doing that. But while I was there – we were at the New Yorker for about two months. On the second month, Benny gave me my notice. Hymie Schertzer was playing lead alto then. He was good friends with Benny. He went up to Benny and said, “Why did you fire that kid? That kid is sensational.” Benny didn’t say anything. But I found out later that I was taking his applause away from him on *Sing, Sing, Sing*.

When I left the band, I stopped off in Chicago and told Louis Jordan – with his Tympani Five – I told Louis Jordan about it. He said, “Why, that four-eyed bastard.” He said, “You’re going to hang out with me.” So I did. He bolstered my ego. So by the time I got home the next day, my dad was at the train station, meeting me there. I said, “What are you doing here, Dad?” He said, “Benny Goodman kept me up all night. He wants you back in the band.” “But he just fired me.” “No. He wants you back in the band.” I got back on the train, went back to New York. He never bothered me [?]. Right up until the time he died, he wanted me to play with him.

Brown: So you went back to play with him after you got back? Your dad told you, “Benny Goodman wants you in place”?

Bellson: Went right back with him until he decided to retire, halfway. That’s when I joined Tommy Dorsey’s band.

Brown: So how long were you actually with Benny Goodman then?

Bellson: I was with him several times. I was with him one time for a year, another time a year-and-a-half, and then a third time too, I think. Long after I’d been with Duke and everybody, I was in New York. Benny was doing stuff up at Yale – one concert. You [?] and do a series of six concerts. I did all those with him.

Brown: Okay. But that first stint, you were with him for two months, and then you got fired for upstaging the boss, basically.

Bellson: Yeah. I think that’s what happened.

Brown: Is that a valuable lesson to learn?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bellson: I couldn't figure out why he's mad at me. I'm getting applause for the band too. But he meant well. I guess he couldn't figure out where all this was coming from that little body.

Brown: Let's go back. When you were out at the Paramount Studios and you played with the sextet, did the other guys – were they receptive to you?

Bellson: Oh yeah, very receptive.

Brown: The rest of the guys in the band?

Bellson: I think it was a quartet [*sic*: quintet]. It was Dave Barbour on guitar, Jimmie Rowles on piano, Benny, of course, and the bass player. I can't think of his name [Cliff Hill]. It was a quartet. You can always tell, when you're mixing it up with the other musicians. When they give you a big smile, that means you're home free. Jimmie Rowles turned around and gave me a big smile, and Dave Barbour did a Freddie Greene on me, so I knew I was doing right. I played brushes, no sticks, on that number, but it was enough to let Benny Goodman know that he liked my time, and he liked my little solo. He dug me.

Brown: I think – I don't know what year this was, but it's on the *Engine Room*, the four-CD collection. They included the selection of you playing with – Louis Bellson, *I want to go where you go*. Do you remember this particular recording? I think it's from this period.

Let's go on. You worked with Benny Goodman. This is your first big break. After you went back with him – you worked two months. Then you got fired for upstaging him. Then you went back with him. Then after you left the Goodman band, who did you go with at that point?

Bellson: There's another hitch there. I've gone with Ted FioRito, then from Ted FioRito to Benny Goodman, right?

Brown: Right.

Bellson: Then I went back to Ted FioRito, and then back with Benny. That was in 1942. '42 was the first time, I think. Oh, I had a stint in the army then.

Brown: According to this record, it says you were with Benny Goodman from September 1942 to April '43, and then it sounds like you went to the military. Is that accurate or not?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: April '43. Yes, that's right. I stayed in the army for three years. I played in Washington, D.C., at Walter Reed Hospital. I was in the band there. We played for all the amputees when they came back from the war.

Brown: So you were inducted into the military? Which fort, or which base?

Bellson: 304th Army Service Forces Band in Washington, D.C. – in Silver Springs, Maryland. That's where I was for three years. I played all the time.

Brown: You were drafted.

Bellson: Yeah. I was very lucky to be able to play. I played all the mallet instruments. They had two or three other drummers – a good band. Johnny Hartman was a singer in that band. We all know who Johnny Hartman was.

Brown: *Lush Life*.

Bellson: A sweetheart, a great singer. In those days we used to go to all the – Georgia Hall, Connecticut Hall, and play with our quintet. Johnny Hartman was our singer. That was quite an experience.

Brown: You're talking about being in the military in the mid-'40s. The military wasn't integrated until 1948, but it sounds like, at least in the Special Services, in the bands, that you had mixed bands. Is that correct?

Bellson: Yeah. Did I get that right? Let's see. I joined Ted FioRito, then went with Benny Goodman from Ted FioRito, and then I joined the army after that, I think, and stayed in the army for three years, then came back with Ted FioRito for about six months, and back with Benny Goodman for a year, and then with Benny – after Benny, I joined Tommy Dorsey, in 1947.

Brown: How did you get that gig?

Bellson: How did I get that gig? Oh yeah. I wanted to study with a guy named Buddy Baker, a composition teacher who was a great arranger for Disney Studios. He made an album with Herb Jeffries, and I liked the way he wrote for strings. Since Benny was retiring, I said, "I want to go out and study with Buddy Baker." Buddy Baker knew Tommy Dorsey very well, and also the baritone saxophone player was good friends with Buddy Baker. He was the baritone saxophone player with Tommy Dorsey's band. So word got around. Buddy [Rich] had left the band. He went into the Marines. They heard about me, so I got the call to come in and audition for Benny Goodman [*sic*: Tommy Dorsey]. At that time, Ted FioRito was the only guy that let me use the two-bass-drum idea. Benny Goodman wouldn't let me use it. He said, "I don't want to pay for two guys.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

One bass drum is enough.” So I did. I did. But Tommy Dorsey loved the two-bass-drum idea. He saw me set up my drums. He was awed by that. Two bass drums, 20 x 20 [inches] long – tubular; 26 x 18 middle tom-tom; and also 9 x 13, 7 x 11 on each side; 16 x 16 floor tom; 18 x 16 floor tom. When I set up that drum – when I finished setting it up – is it all right to use a cuss word? – Tommy Dorsey looked at me and he said, “All you need is a brush up your ass for a [?] and you’ve got a [?].” That’s his exact words.

Brown: Say it again.

Bellson: But he loved drums, having Buddy and Gene in the band for years, Davey Tough, Big Sid Catlett. Jo Jones did some recording with him.

We devised an idea. I told him I should have some kind of idea in the theaters that people – ordinary laymen – hear that sound. They don’t know I’ve got two bass drums. So I told Tommy I need to make a table to put my drum set on, and it goes around. He said, “That’s it.” So he had one made. That was a big thing at the Strand Theater. When I did my number with him, he’d press a button, and I’d go around. He didn’t stop me until my back was to the audience. Then the audience said, “Oh, he’s got two bass drums.” That opened up a new thing. Then also, later on, we had florescent drum sticks. When they turned the lights out, not only the sticks, but as I hit a tom-tom, a light would go on. So all this sound – it was really a tremendous – it was a good gimmick. It really was. It was a musical gimmick.

That job with Tommy Dorsey was one of the most difficult, in that you played about three or four long drum solos during the night, and you played hard. Of course I was young then. I could do that easily. For example, working with Tommy Dorsey the first year, we played six months of one-nighters, on the bus without a day off, 500 miles a night on the bus. We played from 9:00 to 12:30 without taking a break, took a half-hour break, and played an hour overtime. He was right there with you. It was something else. But it was a good band, and he was a great trombone player. I gained a lot of knowledge working with him.

Brown: Can you compare that experience with the Dorsey band as opposed to the Goodman band.

Bellson: Quite different, but both great bands. To me, Benny Goodman joined ranks with Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton, Cab Calloway, Jimmie Lunceford. Those were the real swing bands. Glenn Miller was a good band. Don’t get me wrong. He was the biggest moneymaker of all. But he wasn’t a swing band. We know what a swing band is. But Benny could join that rank. He was that good. That band really swung, especially when you’ve got Lionel in there, Hampton in there, and when he had Big Sid Catlett, Charlie Christian. He was the first integrated band. He had Charlie Christian on guitar.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

The man had some heavy tunes there. Teddy Wilson on piano. So, quite different, but equally good.

Tommy Dorsey's last year, he got intrigued with Basie's band, especially with Ernie Wilkins's writing. He had Ernie write about ten arrangements for him before he died. He loved that sound, that fluid sound. So he was getting there.

Brown: Let's go back and talk about – we are going to talk about you being a trail-blazer yourself as far as race relations in the music industry, but I want to go back and talk about – you were saying with the Tommy Dorsey band, that you were finally allowed to use your double bass drums. Let's go back and talk about your original inspiration and idea for using double bass drums.

Bellson: I got the idea in 1938. I was in high school. I made a drawing of the double-bass-drum kit, the one that you see on this [?]. My teacher said, "What are you doing?" I said, "This is a diagram of a new drum set, a new kind of a drum set." I explained to him that most drummers only use one bass drum. I've got two bass drums. He said, "Work on that." So he passed me on that. I was interested in taking my idea to the various drum companies, but they thought I and Buck Rogers should go to the moon. "You're crazy." "I know I'm crazy, but that's my idea."

That's a Gretsch drum set, the first one that I made. From that point on – the reason that I joined the Gretsch Drum Company is that Benny Goodman had a contract with Gretsch. All I had to do was tell Benny, "No, I'm [with] Slingerland." But he – I was afraid he'd fire me if I said I don't use Gretsch drums, because they gave me about five or six sets of drums for nothing. So I cooled it until later on. Then I left Gretsch and went with Slingerland.

Brown: Went did you actually have your first double-bass-drum kit? You already came up with the prototype in 1938. You had already started designing it. So when did you actually have one?

Bellson: That set was made – the first band was Ted FioRito. I had that when I was working with Ted FioRito for six months, before I joined Benny. That was an oddity. I took up half the bandstand with that kit.

Brown: And it's all your own design, especially with that large tom in the middle? That's all your design?

Bellson: I got rid of that drum eventually, because it made my leg span too great. My legs were sore by the time I finished the gig at night with that drum set.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Brown: How did you negotiate working a bass drum and the pedal with your left foot? I mean the sock cymbal – the hi-hat cymbal.

Bellson: I took the tripod off of the hi-hat and made a connection between the bell of the hi-hat and one of the rods in the bass drum, so that brought it right – this was the bass drum, and the hi-hat was right next to it, by getting rid of the tripod.

Brown: So you had to be an engineering designer as well.

Bellson: Yeah. In those days I was playing toe with the bass drum and heel with the hi-hat, or both together.

Brown: So you had to come up with your own technique and approach.

Bellson: Yeah.

Brown: A lot of people point to Ray McKinley using double bass drums. It sounds like you preceded him at least as far as the idea.

Bellson: I thought he was the first one, but later on he told me, “No. It was you. You were the first one.” He came up – he was with Will Bradley’s band. *Double Drum Boogie* came up with him. He had two bass drums, and he played them with mallets. I thought – I kept giving people the idea that Ray was the first one. When I finally saw him, he said, “No. You were the first one, Lou.” I said, “You’re older than I am, so I figured [it was] from you.”

Brown: Did he actually have two pedals on it, or was he just using the bass drums and playing them with his hands.

Bellson: That I don’t know. I’m inclined to think he was just using the mallets. Then later on, I think, when he saw me he added the pedals.

Brown: But you were the first one that you know of to actually affix pedals to bass drums and play them.

Bellson: Right. Yeah.

Brown: So we can set the record straight now.

Bellson: No, it might have been some guy living in a cave 300 years ago. I don’t know.

Brown: Until that information comes out, right now we’ll go with what we got, which is Louie Bellson coming up with that design in 1938, from a design.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

You said you did it in a class. Was it shop class, art class, design class? Why were you drawing this, and why did your teacher approve it? Was it a music teacher?

Bellson: I knew I was really ambidextrous. I started dreaming about this idea of having another drum on this side. Later on I was the first one to have two snare drums over here and then have an extension of bongo drums over here. So those ideas were coming to me.

I was the first one that invented the silent drum set. I had a practice pad with rubber on the top, and then cymbals made out of rubber. That was the silent drum set. I could practice in the dressing room without bothering anybody. Then later on guys came out with a sophisticated practice set. But I couldn't get those things – what do you call it? – invented – patent. I couldn't get a patent on it, because I didn't know what I was doing. I was a kid. I showed somebody the idea. They'd steal it from me.

Brown: We're going to talk about your relationship with Remo Belli later, so we can talk about how you were able to develop a lot of – and work with somebody who's developing the instrument. Again, that's one of the other things that makes Louie Bellson's history so important, because you have all these other activities as well as being a drummer.

At this point let's take a break.

[recording interrupted]

This picture of this Gretsch prototypical double-bass-drum set – you mentioned that you were using 20-inch bass drums . . .

Bellson: 20 x 20.

Brown: 20 x 20, which is a departure from what was pretty much the norm in those days.

Bellson: That's right.

Brown: What size were the bass drums being used at that time?

Bellson: I was using the 26-inch bass drum. I'm using 24's now.

Brown: [You] like that big sound.

Bellson: Yeah.

Brown: But you went down to the 20. I guess that was to facilitate having two up there.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bellson: Yeah. I was thinking that the tubular – long tube would give me the sound I was looking for. Yet I could put those tom-toms on top of that 20-inch bass drum and not make everything too high, because I always wanted my cymbals to be in a position so I can play rhythm, because today some drummers have – I don't know how they do that. They play with the cymbals very high, but they still get a sound. To me, I go with Jo Jones, who said, "I like that ride cymbal right there, staring me in the face." And I like the Chinese cymbal right over here, and an 18-inch cymbal over here, so I've got three ride cymbals. I remember when Buddy Rich one time on the *Tonight Show* – Eddie Shaughnessy was playing drums. Eddie's a big guy – he sat in on Eddie's drums. He said he had to jump up in the air to hit one cymbal. Eddie got a big kick out of that.

Brown: Speaking of size and drummers, we didn't mention Chick Webb.

Bellson: Oh boy. He was something else.

Brown: You got to see him? Did you see him perform?

Bellson: I saw him once. He was amazing, not only as a drummer, but – Gene Krupa used to say that in those days, the Savoy Ballroom was open. They used to have a battle of the bands up there. They always put Benny Goodman's band with Chick Webb's band, because Chick had Ella Fitzgerald as singer. I saw Gene one time when he was getting ready to do that. He said, "I'm going up to play opposite Chick Webb and get a drum lesson." He didn't know a note if it was as big as this room. Yet you could play an arrangement for him, and he'd call you up and say, "Here's the saxophone parts," and he'd sing the saxophone parts. "Here's the brass parts." He'd sing the brass parts.

Brown: This is Chick Webb?

Bellson: Chick Webb. The most amazing memory. Even better than Buddy. Buddy was supposed to have a good memory, which he did have. But Chick Webb was the champ with that. He not only heard it the first time and got it, but he heard what the whole band was doing. It's unusual. It was a gift of God.

[recording interrupted]

Brown: Take 2 of the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History interview with Louie Bellson in his home in San Jose, California. We're talking about Chick Webb. Please continue.

Bellson: Chick Webb – on some early interviews, when I was young, I failed to mention him, because I forgot that I had met him once. I met him in Chicago. I was amazed at the sound he got with that big bass drum. I think it was either a 28- or a 30-inch bass drum. If you were looking at him from the front, all you saw was a [?] of hair and his sticks flying

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

up in the air. God Almighty. It was most amazing. And the way he played in the band. It's too bad we don't have a lot of footage on him, because a lot of college kids or young high-school kids asked me, "What about Chick Webb?" I could only go so far. But what he did in that short span. Buddy [Rich] talked about him too. There was nobody like Chick Webb. He was a champ.

Brown: He was the first big-band drum leader – drummer who led a big band, at that point.

Bellson: Yes, that's right.

Brown: So I think that that's very important as far as his impact on his music. Other people who played with him – of course Ella [Fitzgerald] – spoke so highly of him – and other folks.

Bellson: Cozy Cole spoke – he loved Chick. Everybody loved Chick. He was a nice person besides. I can imagine – Cozy told me he was in a lot of pain before he died, because of that back injury. But then he went ahead and played. It didn't bother him. When you go to see him – that's the first drummer I ever saw, when he was playing a solo, he used real tiny thin sticks. I could see the chips of wood flying up in the air. I never saw that before. I said wow, wow.

Brown: But you did get a chance to meet him.

Bellson: Yeah.

Brown: How tall was he, about?

Bellson: He was – Roy Haynes – he wasn't as big as Roy Haynes.

Brown: A heart of gold.

Bellson: A heart of gold. When they – I always have to put this in. For years, in my later career, there's three drummers, Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich, and Louie Bellson. I say, no – yes, there's three drummers, but where did we get that from? Chick Webb, Big Sid Catlett, Jo Jones. You have to name those three. You have to know where you came from in order to know where you're going. If you think you're doing something new, they did it then. Baby Dodds. There's another. I didn't realize – I didn't get a chance to meet him. But one time when Pearl [Bailey] – I was married to Pearl at that time – when she went to New York, I put on a record of Baby Dodds, and I was amazed. He's playing all those press rolls. Anything that Gene or Buddy or Jo Jones played, he did it years ago, Baby Dodds. Credit's got to be credit where credit's due.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Brown: Did you listen to any other New Orleans drummers, like either Paul Barbarin or Zutty Singleton?

Bellson: Yeah. Dannie Richmond, Paul Barbarin, and somebody else down there – Earl Palmer. In fact I had Earl Palmer play drums when Pearl did her television shows. She did 15 shows. I conducted the show. I had Ray Brown on bass, Earl Palmer on drums, because Earl could play anything. Great drummer.

Brown: Is there something special about those New Orleans drummers that you can say or talk about as a drummer yourself?

Bellson: They had – they utilized the rudiments to the fullest extent. Steve Gadd plays all those rhythms now. He got them from studying the rudiments and studying some of those drummers. Preservation Hall. I went down there once. The drummer was 92 years old, but he was swinging. All they had was a snare drum, field drum, a wood block, and a cowbell, and oh man.

Brown: You talked about the main influences that came before you, Buddy, and Gene, which were Papa Jo, Chick Webb, and Big Sid. You talked about Chick Webb and Papa Jo. What about Big Sid? Can you talk about Big Sid?

Bellson: Fabulous. He was just the opposite of Chick Webb. He was enormous. He was a big man. When he played, the right stick looked like a toothpick in his hand. But yet he had the most finesse of anybody. A big guy – you expected him to have a blow like that metal drum stick I got in front, but, to quote Dizzy Gillespie – he said nobody could play the Chinese cymbal like Big Sid. With that big hand, he played – sometimes guys overuse it, bash it – but he played it with the bell up and had a beautiful touch. He could really swing. Great, fabulous drummer. He taught me all about brushes, hi-hat – like Jo Jones, how to listen.

Brown: When you say he taught you this, was that just drummer to drummer, maybe sitting to the side? Or did he give you formal lessons?

Bellson: Yeah, he called me aside. I'd be there by that drum set. I remember one time Jo Jones came in to hear me play in New York at one of those little jazz joints. I had – who's the drummer that plays with – I can't think of it – a tenor saxophone player – Elvin played with him for years – John Coltrane. He played bass with John Coltrane. Bobby?

Brown: Bass with John Coltrane?

Bellson: Yeah. He played electric bass and standup bass. Cranshaw – Bobby Cranshaw. I'm sorry. I've got to remember all these names.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Brown: He's working with Sonny Rollins now, still.

Bellson: Yeah, Sonny Rollins. That's what I was trying to think of. Where were we?

Brown: We were talking about . . .

Bellson: Oh, Big Sid Catlett. He would take me – I remember going to Atlantic City to hear Benny Goodman's band. Big Sid was playing with Benny. During one of the intermissions, Big Sid said, "Come here, kid." He said, "Here's how you play the hi-hat." You've got to have a special touch for the hi-hat. "Here's how you play the brushes." That guy was a champ with the brushes, Jo Jones. He came into the nightclub with Bobby Cranshaw. Quartet. John Bunch on piano and Ted Nash on saxophone. Let me tell you. He came in with a newspaper rolled under his arm. When I introduced him, he said, "I'll play the newspaper. You play the snare drum, Lou. I'll play the wall and the newspaper." I wish I had recorded that. He was out of sight. He did more with a newspaper and brushes and the wall than most guys could do with a full set of drums. Fabulous.

Brown: It sounds like the drummers was a fraternity of sorts. It sounds like you guys had a real rapport and looked out for one another? Is that really the case?

Bellson: Oh yeah, yes, absolutely. To the extent, if one guy couldn't make – like if I was out in California working for Quincy Jones and I couldn't make a certain date, I'd call Shelly Manne or Earl Palmer or Paul Humphrey. We'd always look out for one another. Drummers were very close, and we would go hear one another, like Buddy Rich coming to hear me play. I'd go hear him play. One thing about him: he always used to cop my hi-hat and my snare drum. I'd come to the gig at night, and no snare drum and hi-hat. Good thing I had an extra. I said, that darn Buddy Rich – took my hi-hat and my snare drum.

Brown: When's the first time you met Buddy Rich? Do you remember meeting him for the first time?

Bellson: I met him in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He was with Tommy Dorsey's band. I was still going to high school at that time. He impressed me very much. I heard him on radio broadcasts coming from the Hotel Astor in New York with Tommy Dorsey's band. I said, I've got to meet that guy, because it sounds like he's got a lot of technique – not only technique, but he plays good with the band.

From that point on, I joined Benny's band, and we got to know one another. That relationship went on for about – right up to when he died.

Brown: What was he like when you first met him? Because he has a reputation for being abrasive.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: He was brisk, yeah. That's a good title for him, brisk. But he took a liking to me, because I was asking the right questions.

Brown: Such as?

Bellson: On your radio broadcast from New York, how did they set up the microphones? Because I could tell all the beats that you were playing." He said, "The heck with the microphones. That came from me."

Brown: That sounds like Buddy.

Bellson: From that point on, we chatted for a while. I got his address – New York address. I called him. We got to be good friends from that point on, close friends. We had a lot of high respect for one another. We played together quite a few times too.

Brown: Let's got back and talk about the rest of that triumvirate. We already talked about Papa Jo, Big Sid, and Chick Webb. Now we have the Gene, Louie, and Buddy. So talk about your first meeting with Gene Krupa. Here you are. You're playing with Benny Goodman. Gene's the one who really made that chair. So what was it like to meet him for the first time?

Bellson: He's the first guy that brought drums to the foreground – made it a solo instrument. I think it was done before by Baby Dodds, all those early drummers . . .

Brown: Chick Webb.

Bellson: Chick Webb, really, because they didn't get the credit for it. Whoever marketed Gene and Buddy and myself, they did a hell of a good job, because if that would have been the same thing for Chick Webb We know why. Because the black bands weren't as popular in those days. They were popular, but they didn't get the just dues, where the credit goes. The credit goes there. That's where it started. That's got to be said. I say it all the time, because I'm not going to say I invented this and I invented that. It was an outcome of those great players. They're the ones that did it.

Brown: Gene always gave credit as well.

Bellson: Yes he did. Yeah. Buddy did too, on different occasions. He always talked about Jo Jones, because he loved that Basie band.

Brown: It's hard not to.

Bellson: I first met Gene on one of my trips to go study with Roy Knapp. I used to go to the Panther Room in the Hotel Sherman, where Gene had his band there. I always found

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

him to be very congenial. Whatever you wanted to do, great. He took time in between sets to come over and chat with me. I was just a kid. He'd buy me a drink. Of course it was soda then. No liquor. I was never a drinker anyway. But he took time to show me things.

Then of course years later – not too much longer – I won the contest. He remembers me coming into the Hotel Sherman to catch him. That was the first time I met him. My first wife used to make an example of Gene. She said, “I’m married to a great drummer, Louie Bellson, but if you put on stage twenty drummers, include Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich, Louie Bellson, Jo Jones, Shelly Manne, J. C. Heard – twenty drummers up on stage, bingo! Your eyes are going to go right to Gene Krupa.” He was a master showman. He could make more out of [Bellson sings a rhythmic phrase ending in “BAM”] – hit that little cymbal, and the house would come down. When he did that thing with Buddy Rich, Buddy Rich would play a tremendous four-bar break [Bellson makes a whirring sound], Gene would go [Bellson again sings the rhythmic phrase ending in “BAM”], and the place would go crazy. And Buddy would go, “Nahhhhhhhh. How’d you do that?”

Brown: Do you know what the secret is?

Bellson: That was Gene. Benny Goodman told me – he said, “I respect drummers like Jo Jones, Big Sid Catlett, you and Buddy, but Gene was my man. He played for me.” That came from Benny Goodman. So there you go. Tommy Dorsey had a lot of great – Gene played with Tommy Dorsey for a while, and so did Davey Tough. There’s another guy that could play. He had a tremendous right foot. And he was a poet – wrote poetry. He had a lot of smarts.

Brown: You knew him personally. You lived – I saw an account that you lived with him for a couple of months, maybe just before he died. Is that right?

Bellson: Yes.

Brown: Can you talk about Davey Tough? Because he’s another one of those that didn’t live very long. History really didn’t capture some of his contributions.

Bellson: That’s right. He was another little guy. Soaking wet, he weighed 98 pounds. They used to hire another drummer to come in, because after the first hour he’d get drunk and fall down in back of the bass drum. But he’s the first guy to play damp drums, bass drum. By that I mean, years ago guys used to tune their drums – if you had a skin head, and you had to play outdoors in the sun, that drum head would tighten up and you’d get a real peashooters sound. But Davey Tough would carry a little pail of water and a shammy skin, and he’d wet that head down so you got a good damp sound. First guy to do that.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Also he's the first guy – two guys, Jo Jones and Davey Tough – to play the out chorus, the shout chorus, on brushes. Usually when you play the shout chorus on brushes, you were [?] – give me the [?]. No, they played the shout chorus with brushes. It's really obvious in recordings with Woody Herman: *Apple Honey* – that's what Davey Tough is doing. He had a different concept of drumming, but it was beautiful. He had a great right foot. On one of those things – maybe *Apple Honey* or one of those things – at the very end, after they played the last chord, the bass drum goes [Bellson sings a rapidly repeated note]. His [?] foot. Tremendous.

I asked Tommy and Benny about Davey once, and they both said he made you swing. That was his forte. He made you swing. Yet he didn't have enough knowledge on drums. He wanted to learn how to play tympani before he died, but he never made it. A fabulous drummer. He never got his just dues, too. He was always in the background. The guys that knew, they said yeah, he was up there. Shelly Manne loved him, as other players did.

Brown: We've talked about the drummers through the swing era. We talked a little bit about the New-Orleans-style drummers and the swing-era drummers. You started talking a little while back about when you first started hearing Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. We talked about Kenny Clarke. Then earlier, off mike, we talked about Max Roach. Do you want to talk more about Max Roach?

Bellson: Yeah. Max and I did the first clinic – it has to be close to 55 years ago, or maybe more. We did it in Brooklyn. Max and I were the two set players. Sol Goodwin was the tympani, and Jose Bettincourt was mallets. During that clinic, I learned so much from Max, because when I played my segment, Max told me – he says, “Lou, I got a big charge out of listening to you play. Do you ever think of the melody when you're playing a drum solo?” I said, “No. I don't think so.” He said, “If you are playing *Cherokee*, that should be your main thing.” So every time I played *Cherokee* from that point on, I thought about the melody. He taught me how to play melody on the drums, pertaining to the song that I'm playing. It makes a lot of sense.

Also, I went to hear him quite often when he was on 52nd Street, playing with Dizzy, Bird. Every time I got a lesson. He did something different that I didn't know about. I was always aware of the fact that he was listening to Bird and Dizzy. That's what really impressed me. In those days they didn't have monitors and too much, but they were able to hear one another. Max said, “If I'm playing too loud and can't hear Dizzy, that means I'm playing too loud. So simmer down, so I can hear what's going on in the front line.” Because otherwise Dizzy would turn around and say, “What kind of house are you building back there?”

Dizzy taught me how to lay off the bass drum quite a bit, because I came from an era of – when Buddy and Jo Jones and all of us played hard swing, that swing era where you played four beats to the bar on the bass drum, because the music called for that. But now,

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



with the bass players like Ray Brown and Milt Hinton and all those greats today like Christian McBride, they've got the four covered. So now this is syncopated – the bass drum – which you know, and the left hand is syncopated. So I learned from Dizzy. Dizzy said, “Lou” – the first time I played with him, he says, “You don't have to play the bass drum on all four beats. You mix it up a little bit.” I found it hard to do first, because [I was] coming from that other school, but it didn't take me long, working with Dizzy, doing recordings and things with him, to grab a hold of that idea, especially listening to Klook. He'd swing you into bad health any time. Just listening to him play four bars was enough.

Brown: It's great that we're able to get this perspective from somebody who was there, got to see them, knew all of them, and worked with them. Now that we've talked about drummers, I'm going to come back to your career again and talk about the late '40s. At that time you've already worked with Tommy Dorsey. You worked with him from '47 to '49. Then you co-led a sextet with Charlie Shavers? Is that – you started working in a small band?

Bellson: Yeah.

Brown: Do you want to talk about that period?

Bellson: Charlie Shavers was in Tommy's band for three years too. We were roommates. There was one of the greatest trumpet players that ever lived. Tommy Dorsey said he was – because he was not only a great trumpet player. He was a great piano player, great arranger, composer. *Undecided*. He wrote *Undecided* with the John Kirby Sextet: O'Neill Spencer, brushes . . .

Brown: Talk about O'Neill, because a lot of people don't know about him.

Bellson: He was in a class with George Owens when it comes to brushes and playing with a sextet. Taste. Ultimate. Fabulous. O'Neill Spencer was something else.

Brown: Max Roach talks about him too.

Bellson: Yes. Another guy that played with Basie's band was – who am I . . . ?

Brown: Basie? Probably Sonny Payne, no?

Bellson: No, before Sonny.

Brown: Oh, before Sonny.

Bellson: Not Gus Johnson either. Shadow. Shadow Wilson.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Brown: Shadow.

Bellson: Shadow Wilson.

Brown: Talk about Shadow.

Bellson: When I first heard him play – that four-bar break he made on – with Basie’s Band – *Queer Street*, that’s a classic. Today there’s a guy around called Harold Jones that’s another fabulous drummer. He lives up here. He can really play. He’ll swing you into bad health too. He knows that book.

Sonny Payne was great. I know he was a master showman, throwing the sticks up in the air, but that was a gimmick. But he could really play. That *Atomic* album that Neal Hefti wrote for Basie, Sonny really played well on that.

Brown: Let’s go back and talk about that sextet that you co-led with Charlie Shavers. Who else was in that band?

Bellson: I had – Terry Gibbs was the vibraphone player. Lou Levy was the piano player. Oscar Pettiford was the bass player.

Brown: A star band.

Bellson: Yeah. What a band that was. Jerry Winters, I think, was the clarinet player.

Charlie Shavers, we were roommates for three years, and we never went to a restaurant to eat. He went out and got a hot plate, went to the grocery store, and came back. Charlie was a great cook. We had home-cooked food. It smelled so good in the theaters that Tommy Dorsey had to come up and say, “What are you guys doing?” He joined us. Black-eyed peas, cornbread, greens. All soul food, but good, prepared right.

Brown: Did you guys record?

Bellson: Unfortunately that record ban was on at that time. It’s too bad, because that was a good little band. That’s the first time that Oscar Pettiford played the cello, because he knew that Charlie Shavers could play bass. After a while Charlie said, “Hey. I play trumpet too. I could play bass, but not every number.” Oscar Pettiford was having a ball, playing that cello, which he played very well. First time he did it, with our sextet. It’s too bad we didn’t have some recordings of that, because later on we had a little band with Zoot Sims, George Duvivier on bass, Charlie Shavers, and Don Abney on piano. That was a good little band too. We couldn’t record with that either. The record ban was still on.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Brown: So you felt comfortable working in big bands or small bands, because . . .

Bellson: Oh yeah.

Brown: . . . you could play in any context at this point.

Bellson: Because with Benny Goodman, I played with the sextet, quartet, the trio. Tommy Dorsey had the Clambake Seven. Yeah. I had a lot of early training.

Brown: Then after the sextet you played with Harry James. Is that correct?

Bellson: Yeah, Harry James.

Brown: How did that go?

Bellson: Wonderful.

Brown: How long were you with Harry?

Bellson: He played drums for the circus. He'd come from a circus band, and he could play the drums. He could play all the gallops. He could play. Great trumpet player too. We were working just weekends with Harry. He was semi-retired. Great player. I had a great time with Harry.

Brown: When did you – do you remember the circumstances for joining that band?

Bellson: When I left Tommy's band, I wanted to study with Buddy Baker. I mentioned him before: my composition teacher. While I was out there, I stayed at Juan Tizol's house. That's how I got with Duke's band.

Brown: That's a story there.

Bellson: That's coming up. So Harry – Juan Tizol – I stayed at his house. Charlie Shavers was – no, we're past Charlie now. We're with Harry, aren't we? Yeah. I wanted to study with Buddy Baker, so that was my excuse for leaving Tommy's band. He got mad at me. Tommy got mad at me. Remember I talked to you about that, the revolving platform? He got mad at me and turned me around. When he found out that I was leaving the band, he turned me around and left me there. I made one comment which is a classic. I turned around to Tommy and said, "Even Shakespeare's got an ending." Then he really got mad at me. We parted friends after that, because he understood. But he didn't want me to leave the band. Actually, I was having a good time, but things – I was interested in composing classical music, learning how to write for strings, woodwinds, orchestra. My

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

first assignment with Buddy Baker – he gave me the full score of *Daphnis and Chloé* by Maurice Ravel. He said, “Here. Take it. Next month I want you to learn the whole thing.” I said, “I beg your pardon?” But I got into it.

Brown: That’s a masterpiece of orchestration. For me, that is incredible. He started you on the best there is.

Bellson: Bartok – Bela Bartok – was another one. I missed a chance to meet him when I was with Benny Goodman’s band in 1942. Bela Bartok was still living. He was broke. After writing *Concerto for Orchestra* and all of the brilliant things, he wound up broke. Mel Powell, the piano player with Benny Goodman, used to bring him groceries to keep him alive. I was supposed to go with Mel one day, but Benny had me doing something else. So I missed the opportunity to meet Bela Bartok. He died in 1945. A genius.

Brown: What else were you studying with Mr. Baker. Did he have you work out [of] any books? Obviously he had you look at scores. So did he have you . . .? Because you talk about other people like Gershwin or even – he studied the Schillinger method. Is that something that you worked with as well? Or did you work at the Piston method or any of those?

Bellson: I just stuck with Buddy. He gave me specific assignments. He said – the interesting thing about Harry James is *The Hawk Talks*, which I wrote – with Duke [Ellington], I wrote that for Harry James, because they referred to him as the Hawk. Not only Coleman Hawkins, but Harry James was the Hawk. We called him the Hawk. I wrote that for Harry James while I was with the band. I’ll tell you how that fits in with Duke later on.

Harry was one of the first guys to play my music, my arrangements: [?] *Swing, Hawk Talks*. I did those things. He played my music. Whereas with Tommy, he had his own arrangers. It’s an odd thing. While I was with Tommy for several years, I wrote the score to *Skin Deep*. I wrote it, put it in a suitcase, and forgot about it. It didn’t come to life until I joined Duke’s band, but I wrote it in 1948.

Brown: I don’t know if we captured it or not: how did you get into Harry James’s band?

Bellson: That was through Buddy Baker and Marty Berman, the baritone saxophone player with Tommy’s band. They both recommended me to join Harry.

Brown: What were the circumstances of your departure from Harry’s band?

Bellson: As I said before, I stayed with Juan Tizol, because Juan Tizol was with Harry, but every day he talked to Duke. They talked over the phone every day. Willie Smith was

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

also in Harry James's band, the lead alto player who played with Jimmie Lunceford for years. You know about him?

Brown: Yeah. His saxophone's at the Smithsonian.

Bellson: Jimmy Crawford was another drummer with Jimmie Lunceford. They played the two-beat style, Snooky Young playing trumpet.

After being with Harry, Juan Tizol told me, "I just talked to Duke. He knows about Willie Smith. I told him about you. He's looking for a drummer." So the three of us decided, let's talk to Harry, since he's only playing one day a week, and tell him we've got a chance to join Duke. So all three of us said, "Harry" – called him Hawk. "Hey Hawk. We've got a chance to join Duke Ellington's band: Willie Smith, Tizol, and Louie." Harry James paused for a minute. He looked at me, and he said, "Take me with you." He actually said that. So we did. We went. He didn't want to see us go. We worked one night a week, and we worked with Duke. He loved Duke. So there we were.

Brown: So Juan facilitated that one – Juan Tizol – going over to see Duke.

Bellson: What's that again?

Brown: Was that Juan Tizol who arranged for you to go over to see Duke? You actually at that point went over?

Bellson: Yes, Juan Tizol.

Brown: Was that the first time you met Duke Ellington?

Bellson: No. The first time I met Duke was in my hometown, Moline, Illinois, when Duke's band came to town to play the Illinois Theater. That's a good memory, right? I feel ashamed to say this, but Herb Jeffries was with the band, and they wouldn't let the band stay at the hotel. They had to sleep on their bunks on the train. They came on the train. Duke offered to pay for the whole floor of the hotel. They still wouldn't let him stay there. Herb Jeffries and I talk about that all the time.

I met Duke then. I met Ben Webster first. I met him backstage. He said, "Come on. I want to introduce you to Duke." I met Johnny Hodges, Duke, Ben Webster, Barney Bigard, Tricky Sam [Nanton], Lawrence Brown, all of them. Ben Webster told me, "Hey kid. You play drums, don't you?" I say, "Yeah." He said, "Where can I play, after the theater? I'd like to go out and do some jamming." So him and I went out to Stan[?] Shores, a little place where they play jazz. I had a quartet. I played with Ben Webster all night long. I'll never forget that. That's an experience. We played so good. We wound up

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



just him and I. We left the trumpet player back – 10,000 choruses back. That’s how I met Duke – through Ben Webster.

Brown: Do you remember that meeting with Duke? Do you remember him.

Bellson: Yeah. It was very congenial. He’s always been a trustworthy gentleman, always has time for you. I know he dug me because I didn’t ask him a lot of questions. I was brief. I could tell by the way he looked at me – let me check this dude out. He remembers that, later on – that meeting. He said, “I know, because Ben Webster told me, ‘You’ve got to hear this kid play’.” I think that was a break-in for me joining Duke’s band later on.

Brown: Now you’re back with Juan Tizol. You guys look into getting into the band. Now you’re meeting him for the second time. What happened at this meeting, when you went over there with Hawk and all those folks?

Bellson: When I joined the band, they were doing a dance gig tour, which is much easier than those big, long, extended compositions that Duke – because [there was] no drum book, nothing to go by.

Brown: You were replacing Sonny Greer? Or not?

Bellson: No. Sonny Greer had left for a while. He had Charlie Smith.

Brown: Oh Charlie. A left-handed drummer.

Bellson: Charlie played good with the band. He preferred to play in a small band, but he played good with Duke’s band. I followed Charlie Smith. No drum book at all. Nothing. And nobody said anything. Clark Terry was the only one that answered one of my questions. They said, “That’s okay, Jake. You’ll hear it.” I’m sure I will hear it, but I’d like to have some kind of cue. Anyway, I was doing okay, being that I was an arranger. I was sitting right next to Lawrence Brown. The trombone book – I could see it from my drum chair, so I could tell what figures they were making that were important. So I got along okay for the dance band, because they’re all the same tempo.

I looked at the itinerary. Coming up in Champagne, Illinois: Duke Ellington in concert, playing the *Harlem Suite*. So I went to Clark Terry. I said, “Clark. What about *Harlem Suite*?” He said, “No problem.” I said, “I know it’s no problem with you, but I’m asking you to tell me about it, because we’ve been playing dance gigs, which is easy. But now, tell me about the *Harlem Suite*.” So he took his part out. 12 pages long. He said, “The key to this whole thing, Lou, is you’ve got to watch Duke. He’s going to give you all the directions you need. So, be cool, and listen. Look over the trombone book if you want, but I can tell you this: keep your eyes on Duke, and he’ll give you signs like, ‘I want to

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

hear you, or soft, or staccato, or fluid, or tacit, lay out, come in, give me wood, brushes’.” And he did. How I got through that, I don’t know. But Duke did it.

That was a lesson in being alert, because later on I had a chance to record with the New York Philharmonic. Just John Lamb and I – we were the only two members – 125 players in the orchestra, and Duke conducting. I was the only one that didn’t have any music. It was *The Golden Broom and the Green Apple*, 20 minutes of music. Duke saw I was worried. My drum set was right below him. He came over to me, bent over me right before the down beat, and said, “Lou, the first part’s in 3/4.” I said, “Thanks.” Can you imagine that? 125 players. After – we played for an hour and a half – all the string players and woodwind players around me said, “Oh, you memorized it, huh Lou?” I said, “No. I never heard it before.” They said, “How’d you know what to do?” I said, “I watched him.”

So what I did: I took the score home. Luther Henderson wrote the score out for Duke just on that one piece – *Tone Parallel of Harlem*. Duke wrote it – the score and everything. But Luther Henderson wrote the score. I took the score home and made a complete drum-set part and handed it to Duke on my way out, after we played with the symphony orchestra. So Duke said, “Now you can understand why I didn’t write a drum part for you. It isn’t every day I get a Louie Bellson drum part.” I said, “Yeah. You took me through my paces, though.” “Yeah, that’s all right.” He had his way of doing things, Duke. That was something.

Brown: I’m going to read one of my favorite passages from Duke Ellington’s autobiography. Page 225: “Louie Bellson (Louis Balassoni) is so handsome a cat that when he’s on the stand the chicks don’t see anybody but him. Chicks come, wait, and hope, but he’s not very forward with the girls.”

“He took us, the entire band and show – Nat Cole, Sarah Vaughan, Patterson and Jackson, Timmie Rodgers, Peg Leg Bates, and I don’t know how many others – to his house one night when the *Big Show of ’51* played Moline, Illinois. His beautiful mother, who is as cute as can be and whom everybody calls Curly, served an Italian dinner of endless courses. Patterson and Jackson, the heavy boys of the eating league, were filled to overflowing and knocked out ’way before the last course. I paced this gorgeous feast with the proper salad punctuations, of course, and came off champ. Everybody else thought every course was the main course. I was alone with – and ate – the dessert. It was the greatest reception since Mrs. Carney laid the band out, stuffing them with Boston-type food. What a wonderful family!”

“Louis Bellson is the epitome of what Paul Gonsalves means when he says, ‘He’s a beautiful cat, man!’ For in spite of his outrageous beauty, Louis Bellson is truly a beautiful person. With never a thought about getting even or getting the better of any man, he has the soul of a saint. There is nothing too good for someone he likes, and I

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

don't know anybody he doesn't like, or anybody who doesn't like him. He and Billy Strayhorn were very good buddies, when he was with us as a musician."

"Supporting or solo, he is the epitome of perfection, a brilliant performer. We really felt it when he had to quit to go and organize a band to back up his lovely wife, who, as you must know, is sometimes known as Pearlie Mae, the inimitable Pearl Bailey."

"We are proud indeed to have been the first to present him as a *musician extraordinaire* in an entire fifteen-minute feature. Then, too, he keeps coming back with great big bands, for which he writes the orchestrations. We are still getting requests for his 'Skin Deep' and 'The Hawk Talks'."

It sounds like you guys were a mutual admiration society.

Bellson: I was blessed, being around artists like Duke, Basie. They're the ones that did it. When you joined ranks with people like that – artists and humanitarians like that – you've got it made, because all you've got to do is keep your eyes and ears open, and they're teaching you, every night on the bandstand. I know some drummers who would give their left arm just to play one number with Duke, and I had two and a half years once, and one year another time. That's a blessing. So my take on this is, if it wasn't for them, where would I be? I'd be home making spaghetti. When you have that kind of – because all those bandleaders were not only great on the bandstand, but off the bandstand – humanitarians. They had time for everybody. He spent as much time with you as if you were the President. Duke's dressing-room door was always open, whoever had a problem. That's why he had all those guys for so many years: Carney, 50 years; Rabbit [Johnny Hodges], 45 years; everybody – Lawrence Brown, Sonny Greer.

That's another guy. Sonny Greer. I loved him. He fit that band to a tee, that early band. A different style altogether, but good. Last time I saw him, he had been out of the band. I was with Duke's band at the Apollo. He came up to me and says, "Lou, I need to get a pair of hi-hats." I always carried some extra ones. So I went out to the dressing room after the show and gave him the hi-hats. He kissed me and says, "Great." A fabulous guy. One of a kind.

Brown: How would you describe his style, his drumming style?

Bellson: Strictly original. There's nobody else who was like him. He fit that band. First of all, his stature on the seat. He sat real high. He played with his toe almost all the time. Very seldom with the heel down. He had beaucoup instruments around him. All he had to do was go like this with his right stick and he'd hit something: a set of tympani, chimes, vibes, bells, everything, and he played all of that. He was strictly original.

Brown: Did you know him personally?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bellson: Yeah.

Brown: How was he as a person?

Bellson: Wonderful. Funny. All drummers are funny, anyway. My first wife, Pearl, said, “Drummers are funny,” and my wife now says, “You guys are all comedians.” We learn that. Getting back to that theater, that’s the one thing that I’m sorry to say went out of style, if that’s the right word to use – the theaters, RKO houses, when you’d go in and hear a great band, and the likes of Bill Bailey on tap-dancing, Teddy Hale, the Nicholas Brothers, the Berry Brothers, all that. If that was going on today, the kids would say wow, wow. The ballrooms were open, swing. All that television knocked all that out. I’m not saying that television is bad, but that upbringing of living on the stage and playing with all those greats, it really stays with you, because you learn to be a comedian. You learn to tell jokes. You learn how to be an m.c. You learn how to tap dance. You learn how to do the whole thing. That was a golden era, really, in a way. There’s a lot of great things happening today, but the barometer is, if you go to a lot of colleges and ask the kids – like they ask Clark Terry, “How was it like, playing with Duke’s band?” and “How was it like to play with Basie’s band?”, and you’d have a pow-wow session and tell them, they’d all say, “We were born 40 years too late.” “How was it to play with Dizzy Gillespie? Bird?” There again, when you have that kind of teachers – those kind of mentors – all you have to do is pay attention, and it rubs off, because that’s the history of American music, right there.

Brown: We were talking about your time with Duke’s band. Obviously he felt comfortable enough with you and either invited you or allowed you to bring your own music. Can you talk about how that process came about?

Bellson: When Tizol came to me after I’d been in the band a couple of months – the first couple weeks Billy Strayhorn and I roomed together, because he used to go with the band once in a while. There’s a genius. Billy Strayhorn was a genius. I learned an awful lot. I made the mistake of saying to him, when I first met him, “Strayhorn, how did Duke voice *Caravan*?” He went like this to me: naaaaaaaaa. They kept their ideas secret. Only later on, they came to me, and Duke showed me how they did it.

But when I first joined the band, Juan Tizol said, “I told Duke that you write arrangements. So Duke says, “Tell Louie to bring in an arrangement.” When Juan came back to me, I said, “Are you kidding? Me bring an arrangement to Juan Tizol, Billy Strayhorn, and Duke Ellington? No way.” So Juan came to me a second time. “Duke said, ‘Bring the arrangement in’.” He had to ask me three times. He said, “Now, Lou. Bring in those arrangements.” I handed them to Duke, and I ran.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



The thing that knocked me out with, the first time he heard *The Hawk Talks*, he recorded it on Columbia. I was amazed.

Brown: *Ellington Uptown.*

Bellson: Yeah. Then came *Skin Deep*. The history of *Skin Deep*: I told you I wrote that when I was with Tommy's band in 1948, put it in a drawer, forgot about it. I took it back out when Duke said, "Have you got a drum vehicle?" I said, "Yeah, I do have." During those years, it was hard to record drum beats – especially fast beats – and make them clear. Duke was a little leery about going into the studio to do that. We were playing one-nighters up around Fresno. We played in a wonderful old ballroom – one of those old-fashioned ballrooms. Duke said – that night we went to Dutch Leonard's house, the famous baseball player. Invited the whole band. He had a guy named Bert – no, not Bert Ryan. I'll think of his name. The guy that invented hi-fi. Bert Porter. Bert Porter was the first guy to use hi-fi. He recorded the concert that night in – where'd I say it was?

Brown: Fresno.

Bellson: Fresno. When we heard the playback, Duke says, "Everybody, next day, down to the ballroom. We're going to record *Skin Deep*." We had two takes. The first take, the right bass drum beater flew out of the pedal. So I had to stop and do it over again. But I did it on the second take. We heard the playback, and Duke said, "This is it." We sent it in to Columbia, and they accepted it. It was done in Fresno. That's the history of that, *Skin Deep*. That's why you heard all the clarity of the beats. Even Buddy Rich called me after he heard it. He said, "Where'd you record that?" I said, "In Fresno." He says, "No wonder." He says, "I was wondering how you got all those fast beats in there." Clear.

Brown: Yeah, because you do that double-time section after that intro. Burning.

Bellson: I prayed every time I had to do that. Especially in the later years.

Brown: Duke didn't get the revolving stage for you or any of that? He didn't need that.

Bellson: Oh yeah. He got that.

Brown: He got it?

Bellson: He used it.

Brown: He did do it.

Bellson: Clark Terry did the button. I always warned – I told Clark – I told Clark, "If you see me getting tired with my feet, push me back." He says, "Okay. All right."

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Brown: So you had a really good rapport with the band – the guys in the band.

Bellson: It was beautiful. Every guy in that band was beautiful. It's a family. It was a family band. We shared everything. Even on that tour. You were asking about that tour, Big Show of 1951? The three main characters were Duke Ellington's band, Sarah Vaughan, and Nat "King" Cole. That was really segregated. We played all those places down South. Birmingham, Alabama, was the first one. They still had all the signs up. "Colored only." "White only." So I would hang out with the band. I'd be eating next to Nat "King" Cole in this train station. He'd look at me and say, "What are you doing here?" I'd say, "I'm with the band. I'm here." He'd start breaking up. "You better get out of here, man."

A strange thing happened there. Jack Costanza was with Nat "King" Cole, bongos. Jack's of Latin descent. The [?] turned around to him and said, "You cannot perform with Nat 'King' Cole on this show." Because he wasn't black. There are segregated audiences, white and colored.

They didn't know about me. I had already rehearsed with the band when we got that notification. They didn't know about me. So Duke came to me and said, "We're going to make you a Haitian." So, I'm from Haiti, right? I said, "Okay." He said, "You know the problems, don't you?" He said, "We're going down to Mississippi and . . ." I said, "Yeah. Okay."

Rose Tizol came with us on the tour, and she was worried about me, because she was a dear person, wonderful, because they had these guys working backstage who were real crackers. When they saw me setting up my drums – my own drums – they said, "This is really an oddity. They've got a white band boy." So they didn't know about me. They were cautious. So Rose ran back to me. She was worried. It came time for the first performance. I couldn't find my trap case. Rose was right in back of me, and these guys were looking at me. I got irritated, because the first number on the concert was [?]. That was a real fast tune. I needed my sticks, and I couldn't find my trap case. Finally I got so mad, I said, "Where's my m.f. drumsticks?" I heard one of the guys backstage say, "That's okay. He's one of them." That was quite an experience, because they couldn't hire a drummer. I had already rehearsed a whole week with Nat "King" Cole, with Sarah, with Duke, with Peg Leg Bates, with Patterson and Jackson. Where are you going to find somebody to suddenly jump in. Besides, I was featured with Duke's band. So that was an experience. But I got through it.

[recording interrupted]

Brown: We're on tape 3.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bellson: So there was a lot of tense moments, but there was also, down South, a lot of wonderful people. In Mississippi, they had Duke and Strayhorn and I and a couple of others come to their house and stay there. They fed us. There were a lot of good people down there. They weren't all crackers. I wanted to mention that, because that was nice to know, that somebody's thinking in the right direction.

Brown: So you're saying some white families invited you in, or black families invited you in?

Bellson: Yeah, white families.

Brown: So they were accepting of the fact that you were an integrated group.

Bellson: Yeah.

Brown: Let's talk about what that was like. You mentioned earlier in this interview about how Benny Goodman was a pioneer, but you yourself were a trailblazer in many ways, and you endured a lot of, shall we say, kinds of experiences that weren't really the norm at that time. Separate but equal was the law of the land, and segregation was strictly enforced. But you seem to feel comfortable crossing color lines. So maybe talk about, what was it about your upbringing or your experiences that allowed you to have such a progressive view and such a humanitarian heart.

Bellson: The upbringing had a lot to do with it. I was exposed to music. Like Duke used to say, "There's only two kinds of music: good music and bad music." I was exposed to good music. That's what I thought of. The color line didn't come into second thought. Even when I hired my own band, I didn't hire anybody because of their color. I hired them for their musicianship and their artistry. When you think in those terms, you're thinking of people.

There's a lot I can tell you about with Pearl coming up, too – that same idea. With Duke and all these other bands that I worked with, I felt comfortable working with the bands. Duke, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman – the only band I never really worked with is Jimmie Lunceford's. Cab [Calloway]'s band – I sat in with Cab's band, with Cozy [Cole]. Cozy was like a brother to me. Having that kind of exposure – the Good Lord gives you a chance to live among your peers and know that you're there because of music, for everybody to enjoy. Let the bad things – if they're going to happen, let them happen, but know in your heart that shouldn't have happened. It's hard to express this sometimes in words, but you just said that Duke's band was like a family. That was like my family here, my sisters and four boys. Duke's band was just – that's why they felt so good coming to my house, because we were all family. You can't beat that family. That's love, and love rules the world.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center

When I first met Pearl – can I go into that?

Brown: Sure.

Bellson: I met – the Tizol family’s involved there too, because the room I occupied when I was with Juan Tizol – Harry James years – that’s the same room that Pearl occupied when she came to town. So that’s all I heard was Pearl Bailey, Pearl Bailey. You’ve got to meet Pearl Bailey. The chance came. I joined Duke’s band. We were playing at the Howard Theater in Washington, D.C. Pearl came in to play Cavacas Grill. Do you know about that?

Brown: No.

Bellson: That was a jazz club, Cavacas Grill. So Juan Tizol says, “We’re going to go watch Pearl, and you’re going to meet Pearl.” “Okay.” I met her that afternoon. She came backstage at the theater and said, “You coming tonight to watch?” I said, “Yep.” So I came into the theater. I was very impressed with her, very much, not only as a talent, but as a person. She was a giver, and you felt easy with her. Came the second night. Brought the flowers. Came the third night. Brought the flowers. Fourth night. Brought the flowers, and I walked her home. Before I said goodbye to her, I said, “I have something very important I want to tell you.” She said, “The answer is yes.” And we got married, in four days. Isn’t that something?

We ran into some problems. Married to her for 39 years. I remember one time we were playing in Chicago – playing the Regal Theater and the Howard Theater – the Regal Theater in Chicago – but before I met Pearl, she was telling me about, in Chicago she was at this Chinese restaurant. She went over with her hair dresser. She sat there talking for a long time, and then she said, “Don’t tell me the Chinese are going to shower down on me.” She said, “We waited there too long. Nobody was coming to our table.” So she finally caught the eye of the manager. She said, “Come here.” The manager came over and said, “Yes. What can I do for you?” She said, “Look. I came over here to pick cotton and you came over here to” – what was it now? – “you came over here to do laundry and I came over here to pick cotton. So give me your damn menu now, will you?” He brought the menu over. That’s some choice words, right?

But overall we had a nice association. Pearl was an extraordinary person, in that everybody loved her. I don’t care who it was. If they see her on television, they felt like – if they see her, they felt like holding hands with her to say, we love you. So a lot of those things passed by us because of her. They didn’t think about her being black. They just thought of a person that we love, and let me touch you. I love the way you sing. I love the way you dance. The other things, we better let them go by.

Brown: You had children, you and Pearl?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: We found out that she couldn't have children, so we adopted two kids: Dee Dee, when she was four months old, and Tony, who just passed away a couple of months ago. My son. 51 years old. He got real sick. Dee Dee – that's [a picture of] Dee Dee up in the corner there – she's about 42 now. A good singer. She's like her mother.

Then after being married to Pearl for 39 years, I met another gem. I thought after Pearl I was going to not get married again. Just play my drums, write music, tour, write, compose, keep on doing it, until I went on a Duke Ellington cruise, which this young lady was on that same cruise. When I saw her with a mini-skirt on – I told her later on – I said, “You need a lot of loving, and I'm just the guy that can give it to you.”

Brown: Spoken like a true drummer.

Bellson: She a smart lady. You had a chance to meet her already. She's a graduate of Harvard, MIT, and Earlham – three universities. She quit all those things just to come with me and sell CDs. Isn't that something? That way we kept together, because she knew that I had a career, and she was willing to back me up. That's Francine. For me to have two marriages like that – that's a blessing. I look up every day and say, “Thank you Lord.” I've had a good time.

Brown: Still having a good time.

Bellson: I'm still having a good time. Yeah. That's right.

Brown: Let's take a break.

[recording interrupted. It resumes in mid-sentence]

Bellson: . . . Royal Festival Hall.

Brown: Of that trio? Or quartet?

Bellson: It was a trio. Ray Brown – Brown wasn't there. It was – who was the other bass player there?

Kimery: Milt Hinton?

Bellson: No, it wasn't Milt. It was – he played with Basie's band too. John Heard.

Brown: John Heard. He's down in L.A.

Bellson: John Heard, yeah. John Heard and Oscar [Peterson] and I. That's a great CD.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Brown: In London?

Bellson: Yeah. Royal Festival Hall concert.

[recording interrupted]

Brown: I'd like to return again to talking about your experience with Duke Ellington. You mentioned earlier that you were Billy Strayhorn's roommate. I'm just wondering if you had some experiences to share there? You can tell us what it was like being close to Billy Strayhorn. You mentioned he's a genius. Of course we all know that.

Bellson: After that two weeks with Billy Strayhorn, I roomed with Duke. Billy Strayhorn went back home to do some composing or writing. He just came out with the band periodically. But I lasted one week with Duke, because he stays up all night writing music. In the morning when I got up at 9 o'clock, boom, boom, boom, [there's a] knock on the door – no, 4 o'clock in the morning – [a] knock on the door. "Flowers for Mr. Ellington." Duke's busy writing, so I had to answer the doorbell. Flowers, telegram for Mr., flowers, telegram – all night long. I had to answer the door, and I wasn't getting any sleep. So I finally told Duke – I said, "Duke, if you want a good, strong drummer, I've got to get out of here and get some sleep." He laughed. That was another experience.

Brown: Who else did you have for roommates during that two-year stint with Duke? Did you have any other roommates?

Bellson: After that, I roomed with Tizol a couple of times, and Paul Gonsalves. No, pretty much alone then.

Brown: I'm surprised the Duke even had a roommate.

Bellson: Yeah, right. He laughed when I said, "If you want a good, strong drummer, you better let me get out of here right now."

Brown: Any other recollections about your experience with Ellington? Any other recordings or any other tours of note?

Bellson: Recordings were always – they were very superstitious. Did you know that? Duke and Strayhorn were very superstitious. You never whistle in the dressing room. Never whistle. The color yellow is out. Blue is in. Blue is the color. Don't ever buy him shoes, because that means he's stepping out of your life.

Willie Smith was the champion with being superstitious. He had so many, I can't even think of all of them. One in particular was, he had a big coin. It looked like a silver dollar.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



That had to be put on the bureau. It had to be concise, right on the middle of the bureau, and measured on top, before he went to sleep. Then when he opened his alto [saxophone] case to take out his horn, he'd open up the case, look at his horn, and go "boom bam bam bam chim chim bang bang bang," and close it. He'd wait a minute. Then he'd open it up again, look at his horn, "ram boom zing zam zing zing zam rrr rrr rrr rrr bang," and close it. He did that about ten times. Then finally, he'd open it up, "R-boong." He'd grab his horn.

Brown: Every time?

Bellson: Every time.

Brown: Did you ever ask him what was going on?

Bellson: He'd just say, "Ahhhh. That's a secret." Whatever he said, all I could tell was ram-boo-ings, ram-boo-ings, ram-boo-ings. I don't know who ram-boo-ings was, but he had to be pretty heavy.

But Duke was – never wore a shirt that buttoned down all the way. Button half-way down and slipped over. He was the first guy to make a necktie [from] the same material as his shirt, and make a bow-tie out of it. But he never put a shirt on that buttoned all the way down. That's odd.

Strayhorn was the same way. We could never tell – when they collaborated on an arrangement, we couldn't tell where Duke left off and Strayhorn took over. That happened many times, but we couldn't tell who did what.

The story that I got from Strayhorn – he said that he joined the band as a lyricist, not as an arranger, before the band was getting ready to go to Europe. Strayhorn said he didn't go to Europe with the band, but when he came back, he told Duke, "I write arrangements also." He said, "You do?" He said, "Yeah. Here's one arrangement." It was *Take the "A" Train*. After Duke heard that, he put his arm around Strayhorn. He said, "You're with me forever."

Brown: Did you ever see those two work together at the score, at the piano?

Bellson: Yeah. A couple of times I did.

Brown: What was that dynamic like? Was there much talking? What was it like?

Bellson: Not too much talking. If Duke would get an idea, he'd say, "Strays" – we used to call him Strays – "Strays, do this." Strays would pick up from him and continue. No

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

dialogue. It was almost like they knew which way they were going before they did it. That's unbelievable, but that's true.

Brown: Do you remember any particular pieces they were working on or any arrangements?

Bellson: They never put a button on a measure. They never – [Bellson sings a cliched ending to a jazz piece]. Never. They did it with the old tunes, but some of the new stuff, they'd say, "Let's figure out the ending – the last eight bars – on the record date." They wouldn't write it down. Duke would fill out the notes for him – or Strayhorn – they wouldn't put anything on until later. That's never been done before.

Brown: Did Strayhorn have a name for Duke, other than Duke?

Bellson: No. I don't think so. I think he just called him Duke. I called Duke "Maestro."

Brown: Talk about that, how you came up with that title for Duke.

Bellson: I don't know. It just flowed one day. I said, "Well, Maestro, you sure played your buns off last night." He said, "I like that. I like that. Maestro." Then Pat Willard picked up on it. So from that [time on], I called him Maestro.

I wrote a piece when I was in the band called *Ortseam*, which is maestro spelled backwards. I learned to do that from Duke's band. They did that. That's how they got titles.

Kimery: *Smada*.

Brown: *Smada*. Adams.

Kimery: Which is Adams, for [?] Adams.

Brown: Yeah. There are several that are reversed. One for Lana Turner – *Anal Renrut*.

Bellson: That experience with Duke – I listen to what Clark Terry says, "After playing with that band, I do everything like Duke would do it. I conduct my band [with] the same motions that Duke did." Because he was so powerful that, when you spent a lot of time with him, that rubbed off on you, and you automatically did it. Like he had a way of conducting a four beat – 1 2 3 4 – instead of 1 2 3 4 [gestures unknown]. Clark says, "When I got my own band, I conducted the same way Duke could, because it was so right and so good that I just picked up on it and did it."

Brown: Show that one more time. Let me see that, how you do that. Conduct that four.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bellson: 1 2 3 4.

Brown: Ah, so he reversed the 2 and the 3 beat.

Bellson: Instead of 1 2 3 4, it's 1 2 3 4.

Another thing about Duke's band was, they never wrote a score. You see that manuscript paper here? That's what we call – before the score happens, you jot down the original ideas on a score pad.

Brown: A sketch.

Bellson: Yeah. A sketch. Everything's in the concert key. The copyist has to bring the trumpets up a tone. Trombones are okay in the bass clef. The altos, up a sixth. Tenors, up a tone and an octave. It's all concert key.

Brown: The Smithsonian has all his manuscripts, so you can see everything is in concert.

Bellson: I've got some of those too.

But Duke never like to show people his ideas. He'd show certain people. He showed me how he voiced *Caravan*. One day he was – on an occasion he was up at the piano, he motioned to me, come here. I got up and sat down by the piano bench. This is Johnny Hodges. [Bellson sings the melody to *Caravan*.] Up chromatically. Here's Procope. Here's Paul [Gonsalves]. You put that all together.

The wild thing about Duke's band is, every individual was a soloist in that band, and yet collectively they sounded great together. They breathed a certain air in their horns. Where were you going to get another player like Harry Carney, that baritone sound? Lawrence Brown. Rex Stewart. Cat Anderson. Clark Terry. Russell Procope. Jimmy Hamilton. Where are you going . . . ? – Johnny Hodges, the poet. You could give those same notes to a band, a sophisticated band, a good band in L.A., guys who could read their butts off. It won't sound the same. That air that came from those individuals, that God-given air. That's it. Once you hear that, that's it. I had to pinch myself many times. It got so intense that I said, am I really here? Yeah, there's Duke over there, playing piano. Especially a performance of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*. You get to that last chorus, whew. That had to be a highlight. It reaches a point where you want to yell out something. Yeah, or something like that. I heard it now. I heard it. That's the way Sam Rivers kicked that band on that recording . . .

Brown: '56.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: Whew. That was always – their bad night is anybody else’s great night. They never had a bad night. To them they called it a bad night, but it’s really intense. That’s what knocked me out so much. Those five saxophone players sound like ten, not necessarily in volume, but the fullness, the richness that came out of those horns. You had to hear it to appreciate it. I didn’t realize it, listening on record. But seeing it, sitting right next to those guys . . .

Brown: You were with Duke from ’51 through early ’53.

Bellson: Yeah.

Brown: And you left. What were the circumstances of your departure?

Bellson: Meeting Pearl. Because I couldn’t do both. When she was busy doing her things, and I became the musical conductor for her – and I had Don Redman as the bandleader. There’s a name. There was another genius. Him and Benny Carter wrote most of the tunes for Pearl. Don Redman. Again, there was a tiny man, but a genius. *Chant of the Weed*.

Brown: Yeah, it goes all the way back to McKinney’s Cotton Pickers.

Bellson: That’s right. He’s the guy that started the band scene, like through Tommy Dorsey and *Marie*. He started that. He started the bands with the four trumpets and three trombones, and the four trombones, because there was always three trumpets and two trombones. Don Redman. And a beautiful guy. I spent six months out of the year with him every year. He came to visit us. We went out together. We wrote music together. I got to know who he – what Don Redman was like. Fabulous. What a humanitarian. What a genius. Fun.

Brown: You mentioned Benny Carter.

Bellson: Benny Carter’s the same way. Oh boy. If you say Benny Carter to Don Redman, Don says, “He’s the boss.” Or vice versa. If you go to Benny about that, “He’s the boss.” They both wrote most of the charts for Pearl. I remember one incident where Pearl liked the way Erroll Garner played, especially *From this Moment* – no. what’s the name? – *For Once in My Life*. The thing that Tony Bennett sings, only Erroll Garner does it up tempo. [Bellson sings the opening phrase of *For Once in My Life* at a brisk tempo.] She liked the way Erroll played it, so she called Benny Carter once and said, “Benny, get the record of Erroll Garner playing *For Once in My Life* and put all the notes that he played on the piano in the band.” Why did he do that? It was almost impossible to play, but we played it. A lot of rehearsing. Imagine picking out all those notes the same. It took a guy like Benny Carter to transcribe all those notes that Erroll Garner played.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



I took that arrangement on “The Tonight Show” with Doc Severinson once time. Doc said, “I’m going to go ahead and warm up, Lou, in my little practice room. You got the rehearsal.” So I said, “Okay. Pick out *For Once in My Life*.” All the guys started sweating. “Gee whiz.” So Doc came running out of the dressing room. “What was that?” I said, “What?” “That arrangement. What is that?” I said, “Oh, I just finished playing that in Lima, Ohio, with a college band.” Which is a lie. He said, “You did what?” I said, “We just played it in Lima, Ohio, with a college band. They played the daylights out of it.” “Play it again guys.” They played it three or four times for Doc Severinson. He didn’t believe it. So I told him the history of that. He said to me, “No wonder.” Wow. We made him sweat. That’s interesting. That’s Benny Carter for you, and Erroll Garner. They could do it. “The Tonight Show” had a heavy band. They had Snooky Young, Clark Terry. They had Conte Candoli. They had Tommy Newsome, Pete Christlieb. They had a lot of heavies on that band, and they struggled with it. I finally laughed. Doc looked at me and said, “You’re kidding me that Lima, Ohio . . .” I said, “No. They didn’t play that. I wouldn’t put that on them.”

Brown: They’d be having nightmares to this day.

Bellson: We pull that out only on bands that thought they could play good. “Oh, you think you can play good? Okay. Let me hear you play this.”

Brown: How big was the band that you had for Pearl Bailey? How large was it?

Bellson: A regular big band: four trumpets – sometimes five trumpets – four ’bones, five reeds, piano, bass, and drums. Once in a while we had a guitar player. No percussion player.

Brown: So you’re conductor, not drummer? You didn’t do both duties?

Bellson: Oh yeah. I let Don do the conducting. I let Don do the tempos. I started the tempos off. He was good with it. He knew the tempos too. Then later on, when Don passed away, I took over as – leading from the drums, because Pearl’s television show – in 1972 she did 15 shows. That band – the trumpet section was Sweets Edison, Snooky Young, Cat Anderson, Johnny – the guy that . . . – oh, Conte Candoli, and Johnny . . .

Brown: Johnny Coles?

Bellson: Jon – the lead trumpet player on “The Tonight Show.” Jon [?Faddis]. Anyway, Ray Brown was the bass player. Joe Pass was the guitar player. Don Abney was the piano player. Jimmie Cheatham was one of the trombone players. It was an all-star band. All the violins and everything. 40 men. I conducted that whole show. I had a real problem playing drums.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Brown: So your role was musical director? And conductor?

Bellson: Yeah.

Brown: So that lasted from 1953 until . . .? Was that your main musical focus?

Bellson: That was after Pearl did *Hello, Dolly*. 1972, for the next 15 weeks, it was three heavyweights. The first show was Bing Crosby, Louis Armstrong, and Andy Williams. The second show was Tony Bennett, Lucille Ball, and Perry Como. Three heavyweights every show. We had Tina Turner on, Ethel Waters, Erroll Garner, everybody. Three heavyweights for 15 shows. And we can't locate those tapes now. That's a shame. They're going to show up somehow, somewhere. They better, because otherwise it's a – Ella was on. Sarah was on. Peggy Lee. Pearl did a "Kraft Music Hall once, and she had – her guests were Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald. Pearl was right in the middle of them. They did a medley for 15 minutes. After they did that medley, Ella and Sarah walked toward me and said, "Your old lady can really sing." I said, "I know that." Pearl said, "I felt like I was in the middle of two Zildjian cymbals." I told that to Armen. He got a big kick out of that. That's a good description. They swung, too. That's on tape. It's on videotape.

Brown: Let's talk more about your career. Jazz at the Philharmonic. That's 1954.

Bellson: Yeah, right.

Brown: How did that come about, and what was that experience like?

Bellson: That's when I got to – I owe Norman Granz a great thanks for having me play with all those great players, like Oscar Peterson, Ray Brown – of course I played with Ray before with a quartet – a trio and a quartet. That was one of the first times that Oscar had me on the bill with him almost every place he played. Because Ed Thigpen was first. Then I came over later. Norman would call me and say, "Lou, I've got a record date for you." I'd say, "Who is it?" He said, "Art Tatum." Oh my goodness. I said, "What'd you say again?" Art Tatum and Benny Carter and myself. No bass. Just a trio. You got a record of that?

Kimery: A friend of mine made a copy, because I was looking for it, because I had to hear that. We had to hear that.

Brown: We had to listen to it before coming to interview you. Art Tatum and Benny Carter and Louie Bellson.

Bellson: I drove in with Benny Carter. We drove together. When we opened up the door at the studio in Hollywood, Tatum was sitting at the piano. He looked at us – he could see

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



a little bit. Very little – he looked at us, and he said, “I hope you guys don’t play anything fast.” Benny Carter and I said, he hopes we don’t play anything fast. We hope he don’t playing anything . . .

He did something on this record date – let me see if I can find it – *I’m left with the blues in my heart*. That song. Tatum is known for knowing almost every good tune that was written, but he didn’t know about that tune. So he told Benny Carter – he said, “Play the melody for me.” Benny played the melody for him on the alto. That’s not the chorus, right? That’s just the melody. After Benny played the melody, he was going to play the chorus for Art Tatum. Tatum said, “No, no. Norman, roll the tape.” He played all the right changes and went way beyond that. Tatum did.

Brown: He never even heard of it.

Bellson: Never heard it. So Benny Carter and I say, that’s Art Tatum.

He and Oscar Peterson were two giants. Oscar overwhelmingly also, like Tatum. That tape we did with Oscar and John Heard is fabulous. We played *Cute*. You know what tempo they played it? It’s usually [Bellson sings the melody at a relaxed tempo]. Oscar played it [Bellson sings it at an extremely fast tempo].

Brown: How are you going to get your breaks in?

Bellson: Then he turned around to me and laughed. Oh man. Then *Sweet Georgia Brown* is so fast, it’s unbelievable. Only he can play at those tempos. But I enjoyed working with Oscar, too. He was a giant musician. He could really play.

Speaking of tapes, the next to last thing that Duke recorded was something we did out in California. I played drums. Joe Pass is on guitar and Ray Brown on bass and Duke. Just the four of us. You know about that one? He called it *Duke’s Big Four*.

Brown: Oh yeah. I remember seeing that. [?] for Pablo. Norman Granz [?].

Bellson: Yeah. Norman Granz did it. Yeah. Norman did it. Pat Williard, I think, has a copy of that tape. That’s unbelievable. Duke had never heard Joe Pass play. He kept saying, “What’s that guy’s name?” Joe Pass. Joe Passalacqua is his real name. Joe Pass. He said, “Man, that guy could . . .” He was overcome with Joe Pass. Never heard anything like it. That’s [?]. It’s good. It’s a videotape. I asked you about that. She’s got the only copy of it. I may have a copy of it. I think I do have a copy of it. It’s been sitting around up there in the living room.

Kimery: Was it commercially released? Are you talking about the CD? No . . .

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Brown: Is it video?

Bellson: CD. But there's a video on it too. I think she's got the video.

Brown: I've seen the CD, but I haven't seen a video.

Bellson: I've seen the video. It's good.

Brown: Where was it filmed?

Bellson: In Hollywood. We recorded in Hollywood. We ran into [? ?] with a long ponytail.

Brown: That's right.

Bellson: You'll have to let me think about that. You guys are inspiring me to think about all these things.

Brown: So you toured with Jazz at the Philharmonic? You went to Europe?

Bellson: Yes.

Brown: What was that like?

Bellson: Great.

Brown: A great reception?

Bellson: Fabulous. It was in every language a highlight. All the guys played well. I played – the drummers were Buddy Rich and myself. Ella Fitzgerald always closed the show, which she should. Who's going to follow that? She was great. Playing for her, we took turns. I'd play the first half. Then Buddy would play the first half the second part of the tour. The first part was, all the instruments played. The second part was always the guest artists, like Lionel Hampton, Buddy DeFranco, and Oscar and Ray Brown. A lot of music came out of that. Working with Dizzy [Gillespie] and Lester Young.

Brown: When you have a group of musicians like that who come from so many different styles, what was that like to be the drummer and to be responsive to all those different types of approaches?

Bellson: I think Norman was smart. The way he did it was, he delegated Oscar to be the "padrone," so to speak, because there always has to be somebody that says, what do you want to play? What do you want to play? What key do you want to do it in? How do you

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



want to begin and end it? That's all. That's all you need. The in-between comes from there. But that was good, because Oscar was the right man to do it. Being a piano player, he could sort out the key. When [?] would say, I'll do one of my tunes in e-flat, and I'll take the last two choruses. That's it. With those kind of players, you could do that. But the key to it was Oscar being able to handle players like that. Once in a while somebody would – like Lionel would turn around – which he usually did – and say, “Wait a minute. I got it.” He'd go into another tune. So that's okay. We followed him. But that was great. That gave Oscar a chance to shine too and gave the guys a chance to pick out what they wanted to play. Like with Coleman Hawkins, I remember a time he wanted to do *Body and Soul*. We know the key. Let him go. The other guys just sit around while he played it. Just let him have it. When you have – I think that Norman has the idea he'd never hire that group before, if it would jell. Like saxophone players: Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, and Ben Webster. There's different styles altogether, but yet Norman said they could play together, because they're that great. It didn't make any difference what style they were. They were in that era. Like Charlie Shavers and Roy Eldridge. Dizzy, Roy Eldridge, and Charlie Shavers. Or Dizzy and Sweets. Those combinations worked. You put them with anybody, and they worked. Norman knew that.

Brown: Was this your first tour of Europe?

Bellson: No, I did – wait a minute – I did Japan with him, and the States.

Brown: When was the first time you had gone back to – or gone to Italy? What was that like?

Bellson: Where?

Brown: Going to Italy. Did you go . . . ?

Bellson: That's another story. This is really, really a funny one. We got to Europe. Venice, Italy, was one of the dates. They got some material on me way before I got there. “Here's an Italian drummer. His name is Luigi Paulino . . .” All the press was waiting to hear the kid with the two bass drums. They were ready for me. What happened was, the night before we played in – somewhere in Italy. I forget where it was – we had to cross the water to get to Venice to play that gig on a Saturday night. So the little Italian guy driving the truck was scared of Norman. Norman has these high, bushy eyebrows. That kid was afraid of him. So instead of telling Norman, “I didn't pick up the drums at the Victory station” – because we had to go three hours by boat. I guess three hours by boat. We had to go a long ways – the car and then the boat – to get to Venice. And I didn't have my drums with him. The kid forgot to tell Norman I didn't have the drums. Oh man. Here I am, stuck, Saturday night in Venice. No drums. All the good drummers that would have gotten my stuff, they're all busy working. The only guy that I could find was some old guy that hadn't played for 40 years. He had a bass drum that you hit it once and it

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



collapsed. The player collapsed. I got on a half brass cymbal. No hi-hat. And I had to play two shows like that. All the press are going like this. [Bellson speaks Italian]. An Italian gesture, like, what is this guy? Is he kidding? Where are his two bass drums? He sounds terrible. I've never been able to go back to Venice to redeem myself. You can imagine. Oscar and Ray – when it came time for my solo, I kept saying, “Come on. Keep on playing. Keep on playing.” Oh man. They got a half-brass cymbal, a foot-pedal that gave out on me after the first measure. The bass drum was lousy. No hi-hat. No ride cymbal. A pair of sticks. No brushes. You talk about being in a spot. When I hear the name Venice, I know they don't want to hear my name – or maybe if I go there, I'll come with my drum set and prepare it. That broke everybody up. Norman tried to tell the press what happened, but they weren't going for it. The [?] said, “What happened? He sounded terrible.” I said, “Anyone would sound terrible on a set of drums like that.” That's all I could find, because all the good Italian drummers were busy that night. It was a Saturday night. And two shows – we had two concerts to do. Ah. I don't bring it up with every interview, because I feel it was terrible. Oscar and Ray, they were laughing. And Joe Pass. He said, “You keep that set with you. That was good.” “No thanks.”

Brown: Did you ever make it to either Naples or Milano?

Bellson: Yeah.

Brown: So you got to meet some of your family back there?

Bellson: Yeah. I met a lot of cousins on my mother's side. Very little on my dad's side, but my mother had a lot of cousins in Milano. I heard a lot of good players over there too, in Milano especially – northern Italy.

Brown: How did your mother get the nickname Curly?

Bellson: She had curly hair, and she's little. We called her Puny too. She was about that high. And really could cook good. I'm telling you.

Brown: Yeah, Duke . . .

Bellson: Duke came to my house, and when he did, he ate a whole turkey by himself. Yeah, he did. I forgot to tell you that. Then he ate the dessert too. It was a cream – heavy cream. Like a yellow – we call it custard – Italian custard. He ate that on top of the whole turkey. I had made the mistake of going to Patterson and Jackson – they weighed 350 pounds apiece – I made the mistake of going to Patterson and saying – when he got his [?] – I said, “Pat, enjoy it.” He said – lift your hand – “Don't reach your plate like that in front of me. Don't say a word. Leave me alone, will you?” I said, “Okay. I'm sorry.” When it comes down to food – but Duke ate a whole turkey by himself. Those guys could eat.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Brown: Let's take a little break here, because we're getting up onto *A Drum is a Woman*, which is real important.

[recording interrupted]

The next hallmark in your career, or at least one of the ones in the mid-'50s, would have been the recording of Duke Ellington's magnum opus, *A Drum is a Woman*.

Bellson: Did they give me credit for doing that? Because most of that, Sam Woodyard did – most of that. I did *My People*.

Brown: So that would have been the '60s.

Bellson: That was the '60s.

Brown: And then *Sacred Concert* as well.

Bellson: Yeah.

Brown: The first *Sacred Concert* was in the '60s.

Bellson: Right. Yeah.

Brown: So after you left Ellington in early '53, that was pretty much it until you came back to do those particular projects?

Bellson: Yeah, right.

Brown: Okay. So then in the mid-'50s – they'll have to correct this one. We'll send them a message that they need to correct this. They have you listed as recording *A Drum is a Woman*. I do Sam on that, but I didn't know if you had participated as well.

Bellson: I think I did a very little bit of *A Drum is a Woman*. I don't know whether they give me credit. But I know Sam did most of it, Sam Woodyard.

Brown: *Madame Zajj*.

Bellson: Sam was a great drummer.

Brown: There's another example of Duke Ellington reversing it: jazz – zajj. That's another one of those.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Then from '55 to '56 you were back with the Dorsey brothers? How did that come about?

Bellson: Tommy Dorsey was very friendly with Jackie Gleason. Jackie Gleason wanted to do “The Honeymooners” just 30 minutes and devote the other 30 minutes to the Dorsey brothers, Jimmy and Tommy. That band had – Charlie Shavers was in that band. That was a lot of fun. We did a whole season of shows. I’ve got some tapes of those. That was a really good band.

Brown: Who else was in the band other than Charlie Shavers?

Bellson: Let me see. Who else was in that band? He was the only big star. The other guys were all good players, but Charlie was the main key.

Then I had a chance to go to Europe with Basie. Sonny Payne got sick. I recorded with Basie – did an album with him. Then we left for Europe. I was supposed to go into Birdland with my small band, but they cancelled that out so I could help Basie out in Europe. That was six weeks there. Oh boy. That was a lot of fun. Thad Jones was in the band. Al Grey, Frank . . .

Brown: Frank Foster? No.

Kimery: Frank Wess.

Brown: Frank Wess?

Bellson: Frank Foster.

Brown: Those two Frank brothers?

Bellson: Yes, Frank – what was the other Frank?

Brown: Frank Wess, Frank Foster?

Bellson: Frank Wess and Frank Foster. Boy, what a band that was. The lead alto player was Marshall Royal. I mentioned Thad Jones, didn't I?

Brown: Yeah.

Bellson: Freddie Green – a time clock.

Brown: Who was on bass?

Bellson: It wasn't a well-known player, but he was a good player.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Brown: So you played with Duke Ellington in the early '50s and then you ended up playing with Count Basie. That must be a study in contrasts. Compare and contrast that. What was it like working with Count Basie?

Bellson: Great. He was trying to lose weight and not drink. He knew that I'd go to the grocery store every day and stock up, because afterwards, a certain time of year, the restaurants closed. So every night for six weeks I'd hear a knock on my door – bam bam. I said, "Who is it?" "It's me, Base." Come in. We'd start talking about our experiences. Boy, you talk about experience, right there. They were funny. He was a real comedian. I'm trying to remember some of the things he said. One thing he said was – this was way before he got married – he was going with this young girl, a happy girl, a really nice-looking girl. She was – Basie accompanied her quite a bit. There was another guy that she was interested in. His name was Olly. Olly was like 6'-6" and weighed 250 pounds, all muscle. So, she came in – his girlfriend – Basie's girlfriend came in one day. Her eyes were all black. She had blood all over. Basie was in bed. He said, "Who did that? What happened to you? What's the matter?" As he's saying this, he's taking his pajamas off and putting his clothes on. When he got fully clothed, she mentioned Olly's name. When he heard Olly's name, he took his clothes back off, put his pajamas on, and went back to bed. I laughed until I cried. I could just see him doing that. "Olly – why'd you mess around with that man's wife?"

That experience was – talking about life. His daughter was an invalid. He talked very highly about her, how loving she was. He was a very soulful man. He was very much like Duke, Basie was. Every night was – like Ellington's band, every night was a pleasure. The band really swung hard. There's some records out on – there's all of Basie's Europe, with me on there. What was it, '62? Quite a few cuts on there by me – mostly – and Sonny Payne, and some with Butch Miles, another great drummer. He's touring with the band now. All those young whippersnappers. They're all good players.

Working with Basie, him and Duke gave me that freedom. The wonderful thing about the two of those guys was that they're both piano players and they never gave you like a 1-2, 1-2-3-4, which is really hard to grab the groove. They played the piano for about a chorus or two choruses until a groove is set. Boy, that makes a difference if you do it that way.

Kimery: [?] on his recordings [?].

Bellson: He always had little introductions.

Brown: Are you ready to wrap up? Okay. We'll just go ahead. We'll call this – don't stop it yet, because I want to identify everybody that's in the room, because you've been speaking.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



This is completing the – third tape?

Kimery: Third tape.

Brown: . . . third tape of the first day of the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History interview with Louie Bellson at his home in San Jose. He is being interviewed by Anthony Brown and also Ken Kimery of the Smithsonian Institution. We'll continue again tomorrow.

Bellson: Great. I'm looking forward to it.

Brown: Today is October 21st. We're continuing with day two of our Smithsonian Jazz Oral History interview with Louie Bellson in his home in San Jose, California. Good morning, Louie. Once again, here we are.

Bellson: Good morning.

Brown: Sorry to invade your household, but yesterday was such a great experience. We hope that we can continue documenting your life in music and all the contributions you've made to American musical culture.

I'd like to begin, before we continue with the chronology, to talk about some of the things that you discussed yesterday that perhaps you can help expound on. For example, obviously your stint with Duke Ellington was a very, very important part of your career. As arranger-composer, you had personal access to Strays and Duke. You did talk yesterday about the influence they had on you, but I was thinking, if we could look on it now in retrospect, how that experience, being around Duke and Strays, had an impact on your compositional and arranging sensibilities?

Bellson: Having worked with Duke – I think I mentioned also, Clark Terry, said that Duke had such an impact on his life that whatever he decided to do, it was based on what he did with Duke. He learned from Duke: conducting the band, writing, everything. Thad Jones is another one. He loved Duke so much that whenever he would write something, he'd think about Duke. It's so powerful.

Brown: So is that the same with you as well? That influence with Duke was very, very dominant?

Bellson: Yeah. The same with me. I was doing certain things with sketches before I joined Duke's band. Then, when I got to know him well, I started doing the right things that he does. It's so powerful.

Brown: Can you describe in detail what were some of those things? Like, how you prepared a sketch?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: I used to make a sketch and then make a complete score, which takes a long, long, long time – not a concert sketch, but a transposed sketch, which takes a lot of time. But I can see why Duke avoided all that. He wanted to get to the sketch, and then he wanted to hear it right away. When he wrote something, he wanted to hear it right away. When you have to make a sketch and then make a score, that takes a lot of time. It's hard on the eyes. Too tough. So I learned to do that: make a sketch – clean sketch. That way the copyist can transpose it and have it ready.

Brown: Did you actually see Duke go through that process with this copyist? And who were the copyists at that time?

Bellson: Tom Whaley.

Brown: Tom Whaley was still the copyist.

Bellson: Tom Whaley is the copyist.

Brown: So Duke would have a C, or concert, sketch all laid out, and he would give that to Tom Whaley?

Bellson: Right.

Brown: Then Tom Whaley would do what?

Bellson: Juan Tizol also was a copyist.

Brown: And Juan Tizol.

Bellson: The two of them. They were – because normally, if you give that sketch to somebody out of the band, they wouldn't know what Duke's little tricks were, because he used to put "Rab" – that's Johnny Hodges – put "Mex" for Paul Gonsalves.

Brown: He called him Mex?

Bellson: Yeah. He had a name for everybody. He wrote for individual players. That way they kept a good span for – never wrote anything too high for Ray Nance. All the high notes are done by Cat Anderson. So it is personalized. I learned to do that. It saves a lot. I still do that today. In fact I'm getting a score sent in from L.A., a thing called *Opus No.6*. I'll be rehearsing with a band Monday. That's a full band. I gave the copyist a full sketch. He learned from that. I did that a couple weeks ago. If I didn't have a full sketch and had a major score, it would take me a long time. This way [?].

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Brown: Use that shorthand that Duke Ellington – now, what about Strayhorn? How did he prepare his? Did he use the same method?

Bellson: Same way.

Brown: Same way.

Bellson: It's amazing. Billy Strayhorn said that he was doing his even before he met Duke. That shows you how close they were. He writes the sketch. It's amazing, the two of them.

Brown: We're going to talk about your career developing in the '60s, but one of the things at this point, since we're talking about arranging, even during this period and forward, we know that you were working with Benny Bailey [*sic*: Benny Carter] and Don Redman. Were there any particular arrangers that you worked with that you felt really captured the essence of your musical vision?

Bellson: Oh yeah. I was very lucky to have arrangers like Benny Carter, number one; Don Redman, number two; Tommy Newsome, who led "The Tonight Show" band. He wrote a lot of scores for me. He had that swing down. I wanted to hear that. Then I had Bill Holman write some things for me. Bill Holman was a great writer. He was influenced by Fletcher Henderson. Fletcher Henderson influenced everybody, really. Benny Goodman always notates and says that Fletcher Henderson was the reason for his success, because when they played the old Fletcher Henderson arrangement – *Stealin' Apples, Down South Camp Meeting* – they swung like mad. Then I had Bob Florence writing for my band for a while, and – I mentioned Tommy Newsome. Oliver Nelson was a big man in my band. My band manager was saying to me one day – when I was looking for a tenor saxophone player, he came back and said, "I just went to New Jersey and heard a guy named Oliver Nelson play. He was playing with Bill Davis, the organ player." I said, "Let's bring him in. Let's hire him." So we hired him. Not only was he a great saxophone player, but he wrote some great arrangements for me. He wrote all the charts on that James Brown CD. Ernie Wilkins was big with the Basie band. Ernie Wilkins wrote – those were the main guys that I had. In fact, I had all of them writing something during Pearl's 15 television shows. I made sure that that was listed on every show, too. They didn't used to do that. So Pearl and I said, we want their names mentioned. They wrote the charts.

Brown: Who was the producer? Who was instrumental for arranging to have Pearl have her own television show? Do you remember who that was?

Bellson: Who was the manager of that?

Brown: Either manager – who arranged for Pearl to actually have a television show?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bellson: That came about after she had such a big success in *Hello Dolly* in New York.

Brown: When was that? What was the year for her?

Bellson: That was 1969. They started off in Washington, D.C., before it went on Broadway. Then in '72, I think, they opened up in New York. That was quite an opening. Carol Channing was there. She sat next to me in the front row. Carol was the first one to do *Hello Dolly*. Then Louis Armstrong made a hit record out of it. But I sat next to Carol Channing. There were certain standing ovations throughout – the most that's ever been done in the history of Broadway. Walter Winchell was covering it. He was sitting in the front row about five seats away from me. After the show was over, he came to me and said, "I don't want to go backstage, because there's too much going on, but tell Pearl that that opening is the biggest opening I've ever witnessed in my whole life." He said, "Up until that point" – what's the guy's name? The old timer. He used to do a minstrel deal. Al . . .?

Brown: Al Jolson?

Bellson: Al Jolson. He said he went to his opening. It was big. He said Pearl's was bigger. It was fantastic. All the reviews were fabulous. So after Pearl did that, television was next in line. It was just natural for her to do television. So she did all the mediums. She could do all the mediums. Some big stars could only do one, like a television show, or a Broadway show, and that's it. But she could do all of them. She was a great performer.

Brown: It sounds like that household was filled with two great performers. How did you guys work that out, the balancing act of two very, very, very strong, very, very prominent, very successful performers? How did that work?

Bellson: That's a good question, because during interviews during that time, people used to say, aren't you jealous, because Pearl gets more limelight than you do? I said no, I feel great about it, because we're all a family, and I'm doing a gig. I said gigs are far between. As long as I get a gig, I'm all right. Playing drums, that's my life. But I felt good about that, because here I was, musical director for Pearl. It was so great to be doing shows with her. You never got bored. She didn't keep the same format. She changed. In the space of a week – in one week, we were looking at five different shows that she was doing. That was wonderful.

Brown: So the '60s, really into the '70s, your major musical focus was as musical director for Pearl Bailey?

Bellson: Right.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Brown: But at the same time you started your own big band, in 1967.

Bellson: Yes, I did.

Brown: How did that come about?

Bellson: Pearl told me. She said, “Lou” – that was the advantage of having somebody that understands music. She said, “You’ve got your own career going, and I feel sometimes that you’re doing something with your own band.” I said, “I’ve got the band. I rehearse the band.” “You should be doing some dates.” I remember a couple of times I got a phone call to do something. Pearl said, “Go ahead and take the date.” I said, “Yeah, but what’s happening to this date that we’ve got with you? It’s paying an awful lot of money.” “Your end is just as important to me as the gigs.” So she said no on her gig. It was something – a lot of money for that date. She said, “No. I’ll give Lou a chance to do his thing too.” So that was wonderful to have that kind of – a wife that understands. Otherwise if I would have been with her 100% with the writing, it would have stifled me a little bit.

Brown: So you started the band – was it in North Hollywood, where you were based at that point?

Bellson: Yeah, North Hollywood. Right.

Brown: It sounded like you had quite a lineup. You had some of the top players. You had Cat Anderson, Conte Candoli, Bobby Shew, Don Menza, Pete Christlieb, Ted Nash, Joe Romano, John Heard, George Duvivier – I guess they traded off on bass – Frank Strazzeri. Anybody they left out here in the dictionary?

Bellson: And Blue Mitchell.

Brown: Oh yeah, Blue Mitchell. Great.

Bellson: Bobby Shew would not play any jazz as long as Blue was in the band. He loved Blue Mitchell. Then when Blue Mitchell passed away, then Bobby started playing jazz too. But he loved Blue so much. He said, “As long as Blue’s here, he’s the boss.” Blue Mitchell was great, a great performer, a great guy.

Brown: What else can you say about Blue, since he’s overshadowed in the history of jazz, and here you had a really . . . ?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: An underrated player. He was not marketed. We tried to give him as much publicity as possible. But he's one of the unsung heroes as far as trumpet players are concerned.

Brown: So why was it? Was it a personality situation? Or . . .?

Bellson: I don't know. Some of those things I don't understand. Here's some trumpet players that couldn't even shine his shoes, and they get all the glory. I guess it's up to who they have to market them. Half of those guys didn't have a personal manager or a – what do you call them? Pearl had it. Pearl had a spokesman for her. What do they call it?

Brown: Publicist.

Bellson: Publicist, yeah. I'm a little slow this morning.

Brown: Who was Pearl's publicist and manager? Probably several different managers and publicists?

Bellson: Yeah, she had several. Stan Irwin was her manager for a long time.

Brown: Say again?

Bellson: Stan Irwin.

Brown: Irwin? Stan Irwin?

Bellson: Yeah. Stan Irwin was responsible for getting Louis Prima and Keely Smith to the Sahara and negotiating that. That became big. Stan, he does things for me today.

The publicist – she had several of them. They did a good job of keeping her in the foreground all the time, in front of the public eye, which is very important. People like Blue never had that. He was content with just blowing his horn. But thank God his name is emerging more.

Brown: Was he a quiet guy? Was he flamboyant? What was his personality like, Blue Mitchell?

Bellson: He was a very happy guy, but he never pushed himself. He was low-key when it came to that. You said, "Blue, that was great." He said, "Naw, that was nothing. I wasn't on that day." We made a record with *Blue and Shew*. You know about that record?

Brown: Uh-uh.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bellson: It's a part of an album. That was the one where Bobby got the chance to play jazz along with Blue Mitchell. Bill Holman did the chart. It's called *Blue and Shew*.

Brown: Did you play on that one too?

Bellson: Yeah.

Brown: Later on in the interview, I'm going to ask you what were some of the more memorable recordings that you made, but – unless you want to talk about that now? Because your discography is how many pages Ken? Probably about 40, 50 pages. So maybe at the end we'll review it and ask about some particular highlights.

Bellson: I didn't realize that I wrote so much and recorded so much, because that's all I did. Then when somebody suggested it, I said, "Oh, I forgot about that one."

Kimery: That's it.

Brown: This is the Louis Bellson discography. Pretty hefty. I would say that's – the pages aren't numbered, but it's quite extensive. Just a quick guess, I would say it's probably close to . . .

Bellson: Somebody brought up . . .

Brown: . . . close to 40, 50.

Bellson: . . . how is it you made a CD with Meade "Lux" Lewis. I said, "I didn't hardly know Meade 'Lux' Lewis." "You did an album with him." "I did?" "Yeah. I got it right here." Norman Granz called me and said, "I want you to do an album with Meade 'Lux' Lewis, just the two of you, piano and drums. That's all." When I got to the record date, I – he was a wonderful guy, very, very upbeat, and all music. It was fun doing that. Boogie-woogie style. Yeah, great. He was a wonderful man. Did you know about that one?

Brown: No, I didn't know about that one. I'm sure it's in the discography. One that's a particular fascination for me, coming into your house and seeing that little corner in the next room where you've got the James Brown figure and the album cover – can you talk about that date, how that came about, you working with James Brown?

Bellson: James Brown. I had known about James Brown for years. I knew about him. Suddenly I got a phone call. It was James Brown. James Brown said, "Louie, this is James Brown." I said, "You mean *the* James Brown?" He says, "Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I want to make a record with you." I said, "You sure you got the right guy?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "What do you have in mind?" He said, "I want Oliver Nelson. Oliver

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Nelson. I heard Oliver Nelson in your band, and I want to get him to write the arrangements.” I said, “Fine. Wonderful.” “We’ll do it in L.A. with your band, and I’m going to do . . .” Oliver said, “Yeah, I’d like to do that, write the arrangements.” So we got together, and James Brown said, “You write too. Why don’t we do one of your compositions?” So I said, “Okay. I’ve got the right tune for you. It’s called *I need your ki to turn me on.*” It’s on the album. The ki is the k-i, which in Japanese, that’s a martial art form. So I wrote that, and wrote a little patter in between for James Brown. We did that. Everything jelled just perfectly. Also on the record was Maceo . . .

Brown: Maceo Parker?

Bellson: Maceo Parker. It was fun because James was in this little booth, and the band was swinging so hard, he would say, “The band, the band, the band, swing it.” We had him yelling and screaming on that. Did you hear that?

Brown: No. I’ve got to hear it. I’ve got to hear that. That’s great.

He was easy to work with?

Bellson: Oh yeah.

Brown: I don’t suspect he read music, so . . .

Bellson: Right.

Brown: . . . how did it work? You just played the music down for him? How did the session go?

Bellson: Yeah. We played it down once for him. He had it. He was so wrapped up with the band. The sound of the band knocked him out completely, because that band was hot. That band was – they were ready. They ate up those things. We had one short rehearsal with just Oliver, to check it, to see if there were any bad notes. He cleared that off. It was amazing to me that James Brown was able to get into the swing things and also into his own bag, his bag of singing. The same thing with the band. Everything just jelled. No problems at all.

One sad thing that happened was afterwards the recording was – their record man died. Bud Hobgood. He was the one that arranged the recording session. Bud Hobgood died right after that album was done. It made James feel down. That’s why they didn’t publicize it too much. Even today I don’t think they’ve publicized it enough. But it’s a great album. It really is.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Brown: What did Maceo do? What was his role in that? Because he usually served as musical director for the James Brown band. So what was his role in this project?

Bellson: Oliver wrote some tunes for him to play in between on some tunes.

Brown: Did he work with James to go over any of the music? Or was he just a soloist for this date?

Bellson: Yeah, just a soloist. He was there to help James on any arrangements, but he didn't need it. James was – he behaved like a kid with toys. He would scream and whoop, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. The band, the band, the band, the band.”

Brown: That must have been a highlight for you.

Bellson: It was. I spoke to him after that. Then one time he called me, after he had gotten the record a couple of years. He said, “I'd like to do something with Pearl.” I said, “Let me talk to her about it.” She said, “Yeah. It would be nice to do that.” And of course Pearl passed away. That solved that.

Brown: What year was that?

Bellson: 1990. August 18th.

Brown: August 18th, 1990. From what? What was her ailment?

Bellson: She had an anginic condition – her heart condition.

Brown: Was it some thing that had been a problem earlier, or was it unexpected?

Bellson: It had been a problem earlier.

Brown: You said Pearl – when we were talking off mike – was originally from Philadelphia?

Bellson: She was born in Newport News, Virginia, but spent a lot of time in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. – those two places.

Brown: Were you with her when she passed?

Bellson: Yeah. I was with her. We were talking. She was in good health. Everything was going good. It was in the afternoon, about 1:30 or 2 o'clock in the afternoon. I had just given her a backrub. She sat down, and all of a sudden, she says, “Something's happening to me. Something's happening.” She was sitting like where you are, and I was

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

sitting there. She said, “There’s something happening to me.” I said, “What’s the matter?” All of a sudden she just – her eyes went up to the ceiling and she lost control of her body. She leaned forward and said, “I don’t know what’s going on.” I got her so she wouldn’t fall down on the floor. I got her up on the bed. That’s the time when she just blacked out. I got on the phone. Luckily there was a fire station right across the street from the Holiday Inn. It was the Holiday Inn in Philadelphia where this happened. They tried to revive her. I got in the ambulance when it came. I noticed that she wasn’t moving at all. I think she passed away in the ambulance, that quick. By the time we got her to the hospital, the doctors came out and said, “She’s gone.” I stayed in there in the room with her and held her hand, and she’s giving me signals what to do. That sounds farfetched, but it was. She was telling me how to handle the kids, take care of the kids, do this and do that, but she was gone. I felt the vibrations. That was quite an emotional thing.

She was a beautiful person. She was a giver. She gave people, not only of herself, but anything else that she had that somebody else would benefit by, she’d do it. Like, for instance, every year she would go down to the fire station with \$300 worth of chickens to allocate to the poor people. She was always for the underdog, always thinking about that. That’s the way she treated her people in the show. At one point in our career we had a big show on the road. We had a choir – a big choir. That choir was [?].

Brown: Band of gold.

Bellson: We had the big band. It was a big troupe. We traveled all over with it. That’s what she liked to so – liked to make people happy.

Brown: Is she buried in Philadelphia or in California?

Bellson: Back in Philadelphia. Westchester.

Brown: Did she come from a big family?

Bellson: Not a big family. There were three girls and one boy. Virgie was the oldest. She just passed away not too long ago. Then Ura was also a good singer. Pearl was the youngest. Bill Bailey was in between. That was a great tap dancer. He was in a class with Baby Laurence, Teddy Hale, Bojangles, Bill Robinson. He did a takeoff on Bill Robinson that was absolutely fabulous. One of the greatest dancers ever. Duke Ellington quoted himself by saying that Bill Bailey was the greatest tap dancer he’d ever heard. And Duke heard quite a few of them.

Brown: So you knew Bill? Bill Bailey?

Bellson: Yeah. Bill was something else.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Brown: Did you play with him? Did you work together?

Bellson: Oh yeah. We worked in the show with him. On that tour he was also with us. He was a natural comedian too.

Brown: We talked yesterday about how you were a pioneer yourself, a trailblazer as far as race relations. We talked about how you felt that you were nurtured that way, coming up. How was Pearl's family in receiving you? Was there any tension or any animosity? Or were you also welcomed with open arms?

Bellson: Oh yes. I was welcomed with open arms. They were beautiful. Ella Mae Robinson was Pearl's mother. She was a real comedian. She was a beautiful lady. Her father was a reverend. He had a shock of white hair – gray hair, like white hair. He was very stern, very religious. But him and I got good vibes. We talked a lot about life. We had a lot of fun. And Ura and Virgie – they were all very close as a family there.

Brown: And on the other side, was your family accepting and embracing of Pearl as well?

Bellson: Oh yeah. They were very happy. They felt that Pearl had found somebody that liked her – loved her, because she was married four times you know.

Brown: No, I didn't know.

Bellson: Yeah. It didn't work out. One was an alcoholic. Another was into drugs. So when we finally got together, the family was happy that somebody was taking care of Pearl. Because they wanted another boy, before she was born. That's why they called her Aunt Dick. They didn't call her Pearlie. The immediate family, the cousins. Aunt Dick, Aunt Dick, Aunt Dick. It was really Pearlie Mae.

She was responsible for a lot of great things. There's people, since she died, that are interested in doing something for Pearl. I think they should, because when you look at her career, not only as a dancer first and as a singer, then doing a television show and a hit on Broadway, then also a U.N. delegate for the United States, then earning a degree at Georgetown University. They gave her a doctorate there. She went back and earned it. Took her seven years to do it. That's something. That never happened before. The people at Georgetown called me up after she said she was going to earn it. They said, "Is she kidding?" I said, "No, she never [?]. She wants to go back and earn that doctorate." I used to go and pick her up. I'd go, and oftentimes I'd see Pearl conducting the class and the teacher sitting in the audience. That was funny. But she earned it. She got the Dean's award. She was – her schoolmate was Pat Ewing, the basketball player. "See, he's making all the money, and I'm making all the knowledge." She used to say, "It's easier for me to know the Lord than to learn French." But she did it. She was an A student. All

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



those things are fabulous. President Nixon at that time made her ambassador of love. She was very prominent with President Ford. In fact we slept in Lincoln's bed, Pearl and I did. A great big bed at the White House. [?] bed.

Brown: The bed of the Great Emancipator.

Bellson: Right. She was second to Bob Hope in many times at the White House. I used to be in line to meet all the Presidents with her. When I'd come to Ronald Reagan, he'd look at me and say, "What? You again?" I sat next to – I had lunch with Cheney.

Brown: Dick Cheney?

Bellson: Before he was Vice President, years ago. I got to know all of the people at the White House, not only the dignitaries, but the people that worked at the White House. The waiters were all very special people.

Brown: Duke's father used to be a butler at the White House.

Bellson: That's right. So I got to be – I could have had a gig at the White House very easy. Been there many times.

Brown: Did you like the people at the White House? Maybe not the workers, but the temporary residents, i.e., the elected people?

Bellson: Yeah. They loved Pearl. I don't know one of them that didn't – dislike her. But she could tell the President to do something, and it would be done in a way that they listened. For instance, when Reagan was President, there was a certain time when 250 Marines went somewhere in the Gulf, or somewhere overseas. Pearl told, "Don't send those boys over there, because they're going to be killed." Sure enough, they did. All 250 Remember that? It was in the news.

Brown: Um-hmm. 250 were killed.

Bellson: She had – I don't know whether you would call it a psychic memory or what, but she had an intuition. Bill Cosby – every time I see Bill Cosby, Bill Cosby says, "Nefertiti. Nefertiti." I said, "What do you mean, Nefertiti?" He said, "Pearl used to call me Nefertiti. I used to say, 'Pearl, what do you mean, Nefertiti?'" She said, "That was the name of the girl that you had when you went to high school." He said, "Yeah, I guess that's right." Nefertiti. That's how things happened with Pearl. She came up with all these sayings.

Brown: Did she know Bill Cosby in high school?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bellson: Yeah.

Brown: They came up together?

Bellson: Um-hmm.

Brown: That Philadelphia connection.

Bellson: Yeah. There's a real gentleman.

Brown: Bill Cosby?

Bellson: Yeah, Bill. A real philanthropist. Does things for people.

Brown: You got to know him through Pearl?

Bellson: I met him before. When I was with Duke, we played a date in Philadelphia, and he showed up. This was in the days when he was a comedian.

Brown: So we're talking about the mid-'60s or – not back in the '50s?

Bellson: Yeah. It was in the '50s.

Brown: It was in the '50s.

Bellson: It had to be. That was when I was with Ellington. He said hello. I didn't know who he was. He was a stand-up comic, but not well-known.

Brown: He also played drums too.

Bellson: Yeah, he also played drums.

Brown: So he must have been checking you out.

Bellson: That's right.

Brown: Still you remember meeting him? Do you remember anything, the exchange, any of the conversation? I guess he was still just a young kid at that point.

Bellson: Yeah, you're right.

Brown: So you got to see his whole career unfold and develop as well.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: Yeah, right.

Brown: Then did you meet him again over the years? Did you remember – did you guys talk about that first meeting at all? Does he remember that?

Bellson: Yeah. I got to know him. We did a couple television shows together, when we were both individual artists on the show. Then a couple times he asked me – when we did the Playboy, he asked me, “Did Pearl come with you?” I said, “No. She stayed at home.” He told me later on, “I wanted to have her play my mother on the television show.” I said, “Why didn’t you call her?” He said, “I didn’t think I could [?] her.” I said, “[?] her to me.”

There were some of the nice things that happen to people.

Brown: That was a great take. Take a break here.

[recording interrupted]

We were talking about your achievements in the ’60s. The James Brown recording was in November of ’69. If you could talk about some other achievements during this period of the ’60s, when you were leading your band – if you could talk about that, then I want to ask you about what it’s like to be a bandleader, what motivated you to assume that role.

Bellson: I feel, myself, I was ready to be a bandleader because I had experience with other bandleaders. I watched and listened to what they did, how they conducted themselves with their men, with their players. So I was ready to take my own band out. Also, I had respect from my guys, because knowing that I could rehearse the band on one of my charts, I didn’t need somebody else to come in and clear up all the bad notes or whatever. They knew that I was a musician – not only a drummer, but a musician. That made me feel good, that I was able to accomplish that.

Then I had people working in my band that – they didn’t need a bandleader. They were so good. But I started the tempos myself. I learned from working with Duke and Basie that when they played the piano for 32 bars or 64 bars to establish the groove, the band was ready. So what I did, I gave the guys eight bars, up to tempo – four bars, another time. Ballads, give them one bar. All these things came in handy for me.

I was important for me to tell my guys that I liked them. I don’t dislike. I like them, and I want to do a lot of things for them. I don’t want to fight with them, because they’re seasoned players. How am I going to fight with somebody like Blue Mitchell or Conte Candoli or Pete Christlieb or Ernie Wilkins? They all know what to do. I learned that from Duke and Basie. Let them breathe.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Being a bandleader, my door was always open for problems off the bandstand and around the bandstand too. I used to talk about this with Buddy Rich all the time. Buddy would yell and scream at his guys. I said, “You’re not going to get anywhere doing that.” He said, “Yes, but what do you do?” I said, “I don’t yell and scream at them, because they’re grown up. They’re players. They know how to do it.” “You’re different than I am.” I said, “That’s true.”

Brown: How did you deal with any disciplinary problems? If you had a member of the orchestra or the band who was chronically late, either for rehearsal or for the performances, how would you handle those situations?

Bellson: I was very fortunate not to have those problems. But I remember one case where we were recording for Norman Granz with a big band. Two of my players were at a concert and coming in late. So Norman called me in the booth and said, “Look. We’re doing three day’s work. We’ve got one more session. What goes with these two guys that are always coming in late. They’re costing me money and costing you money.” So I went to the two guys and explained to them what was happening. They said, “We can’t help it.” You can’t help it by being on time. What happened was, they came late – an hour late for the first session. By the time they got there, I had replaced them with two other players. So they had no comeback. I saw these two guys later, in Chicago. They said, “We learned a lesson, being with you. We make time now.” Because whoever said this phrase: to be on time is to be late. That’s Johnny Lee Jones said that, a bandleader from Northern Illinois. To be on time is to be late. Because if you’ve got a 1 o’clock record date, and you show up at 1 o’clock, you’re late, because you have to take your horn out of the case and warm up. That’s going to take a half hour. So to be on time is to be late. I learned that.

But I was very fortunate to have all those heavyweights with me. They came – they made time, because they wanted to play. They knew they were playing great music, and they responded. By having artists like that in the band, 95% of the battle is won. You don’t have to worry about what they do offstage. Onstage, they’re doing their thing. They’re doing 100%. With me they gave over 100%.

I had an experience once when Buddy Rich got sick. He was in the hospital for back problems or something. He was gone for a month. The promoter said, “We’ll have to cancel the tour unless you get Louie to come in and play with the band.” So I did. I said, “Okay. I’ll cancel my couple of gigs and take over Buddy’s band for him until he comes back.” I was in contact with Buddy every night. I called him in the hospital. He says, “How did the guys do? Don’t forget to work them hard now. Work them hard.” I said, “I want to talk to you about that. You play two sets with the band – 45 minute sets, right?” He said, “Yeah, that’s right.” I said, “I’m playing two one-hour sets, and the guys want to play another set. They want to play a third set.” So I said, “Let me ask Buddy.” I told Buddy, “The guys want to play three sets.” Silence. I said, “Are you there?” He said,

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center

“Yeah.” He said, “Okay. All right” So we played three sets a night. I had some of my charts there, and I played all of his charts – *West Side Story*. All of them. The band was popping – good band. When the month was over, Pat LaBarbera called me. He said, “I’ve got to tell you. Buddy had a big meeting after you left. The first thing he said was, ‘Bellson’s not here, so wipe the smiles off your face – number 1. Number 2: who gave you guys permission to play three sets?’” Pat LaBarbera says, “Louie says you did.” So Buddy didn’t say a word after that.

I called him. I called Buddy after that, because we were close friends. We were like brothers. I said, “So you had a meeting with the band, huh? Why didn’t you tell them that you okayed the three sets?” “I was just having fun with them?” I said, “Anyway, I got your band all right. They’re in shape. They’ll play three sets.” So he was happy about it.

Brown: What year was that?

Bellson: That had to be in the ’60s.

Brown: A month with the Buddy Rich big band. Whipped them into shape.

Bellson: He had a great band. We played Lennie’s-on-the-Turnpike – quite a few dates back East.

Brown: We were talking about you as a bandleader. You never seemed to feel it was necessary to get a straw boss, somebody who would handle those kinds of issues. Or did you have a straw boss?

Bellson: Yeah. I had – my trombone player Nick DiMaio was the guy that handled the checks for the band. He was good at that. He took care of the business end of it, and I took care of the music part of it. Nick was very good. He was not only a good player, but he was good with the band too. I told him – I said, “We’ve got 17 or 18 good musicians here, so I want to give them a good opportunity.” I learned that from Norman Granz. Norman Granz said, “You join my outfit, you’re going to go first class all the way.” Whenever we flew on an airplane, everybody went first class, for a lot of money. One time, they didn’t have no seats for everybody. One was missing. So I said, “Norman, why don’t you take that seat? I’ll go back in coach.” He said, “This is my tour. You mind your own business. Get your butt up there in first class, and I don’t want to hear nothing . . .” But he – that man did so much for me during that period we talked about.

Brown: Jazz at the Philharmonic?

Bellson: I had my band. We played Donte’s nightclub in North Hollywood. We had people like Wayne Newton, Bill Cosby, and Red Foxx. All the dignitaries came in to hear

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

the band on Thursday nights, to hear that great band. Buddy came in one night. He said, “That band is superb.” Everybody was impressed.

Also, Norman Granz, besides having me on tours in Europe, in Japan, and in the States, he called me up one day and said, “Ella Fitzgerald is getting a big award at Radio City hall in New York. I want your New York band there. I want you to play four numbers, and I want you to escort Ella out on the stage.” I didn’t talk money with him. I said, “Pay the band.” Later on I got a check for playing four numbers and escorting Ella out on the stage. I got a check for \$10,000. That gave you an idea of what he did for people. He loved Roy Eldridge, Dizzy, Lester Young, Ella, Ray Brown, Oscar Peterson. You went first class all the way, stayed in the finest hotels. That was Norman Granz. He’d say, “I want the music to be right.”

I remember a couple of times that somebody was creating some noise while somebody was playing on stage. He walked out on stage, stopped, and said, “There’s some people making noise, and that’s not fair to everybody. So those of you that are making noise, meet me at the box office. I’ll give you your money back. But this is a music concert, and I want – these are artists that have to be dealt with.” He did it.

Recordings – one time he came to Basie and I, and he said, “Why is it that you two guys want a big band to record?” He loved the blues. Small group, and loved the blues. So Basie says, “The reason I got a big band is because I’ve got dates, I’ve got money in the bank, and I’m making a good living.” “Okay. What about you, Lou?” I said, “Ditto, what Basie said.” So he gave us a chance to express ourselves.

I don’t know if you know about this album or not. I mentioned Buddy Baker, my composition teacher. Norman came to me after that and said, “You’ve been with me a long time. I’ve never given you a bonus. What do you want to do for a recording. I don’t care if you want to hire a symphony orchestra. I don’t care what you want to do. What do you want to do?” I said, “My teacher Buddy Baker and I wrote 26 arrangements. Twelve of them are all woodwinds. 26 written arrangements. The other 12 are all strings. Mood music. All love. Journey into love.” He said, “That’s what you want to do? Okay.” There’s a record out now called *Journey into Love*. Beautiful. All compositions, original. I helped Buddy do the scoring. A lot of people can’t believe that’s me, because all my other albums are swing, bebop, straight-ahead.

Brown: Is this going back to your early influences with Ravel, *Daphnis and Chloé*?

Bellson: Yeah.

Brown: That’s what I think of when I think of love music.

Bellson: Right. That’s right.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center

Brown: That's a soundtrack for love if I've ever heard it.

Bellson: Exactly.

Brown: Can you talk about your process, your craft of writing a piece of music? How does that start? Does it come from internal inspiration? External? How does a piece of music start with you? How do you compose?

Bellson: I learned from my dad to think it in my mind first, because if I go to the piano right away, the piano's going to take me on another excursion. What I want to do is think about the music in my head, the whole composition, the melody. Then I'll go to the piano to search for chords. But I want to stick with the melody, because that's important.

I learned that from Duke. I had an experience once with Duke, when Duke – we were on an airplane. Most of the time with Duke's band we traveled by train, because they didn't like to fly. But we had to fly a couple of times. He was sitting about six chairs in front of me on the plane. He turned around to me and said, "Have any manuscript paper?" I said, "No. I've got it in the storage room." He got up, unbuckled. He had a white shirt on. He wrote the staff, five lines. He had bars of music on his sleeve. Later on he told me, "You've got to – when you think about something, you've got to put it down right away. Otherwise you're going to – you forget it." He was right. That was another lesson I learned from him. Get the overall thing.

Then, also, what I learned – after I had the melody planned in my mind, I went to the piano and searched for chords and harmonization's, because, as you know, you can write four bars of music and you can have 50 ways of voicing those four bars of melody. You have to pick the one that you want. That's what Duke did too.

Also, when he wrote something, he wanted to hear it right away. He didn't want to wait. So on the bandstand we'd see 8 bars of music and the melody. Then the next gig we'd see 16 bars of that. Then the next day we'd see a full score on the whole thing. But sometimes we'd see 8 bars. We wouldn't see the 8 bars any more. I said, "Why'd you do that, Duke?" He says, "Because I couldn't think of the rest of it. That 8 bars wasn't enough. It didn't strike me too much, so I let it go." The next night there was 32 bars for a melody. Johnny Hodges played it. He wanted to hear it and [?].

So that's what I [?], because I know a lot of arrangers that go to the piano right from the beginning – good piano players excluded, because that's their instrument they know. But most arrangers say that they go to the piano first. The piano takes you on a different level. What you were thinking of was not that. It was – the keyboard trap made you travel away from the original thought. That's not good. So I learned, doing the whole thing – like this last arrangement. In fact, I'm waiting for the Federal Express man to come today. I hope

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



it comes while you're still here. It will give you an idea. I'll show you what I did. I had [?], my copyist, my sketch. He wrote all the parts for it, but I wrote the whole thing. When I did it, I sat right there where you are at the [?]. I was thinking the whole 32-bar chorus. I went to the piano, played the melody, and the chords came out what I wanted. When I fool around with the piano alone, I do that just to keep my fingers tuned to the piano, not as a player, just as knowing the keyboards. So that's what I do. It's been working good for me. If it worked good for Duke, it would work for me too.

Brown: When you choose to do an arrangement of a tune, is that something that also comes into your head, and then you try to capture that arrangement rather than an original composition? Let's say if you hear *How High the Moon* or something – the arrangement comes into your head? Or how do arrangements – how do you create arrangements?

Bellson: To create an arrangement – I'm going back to my early days with my dad in the music store. He made me take lessons on the trumpet, the trombone, and the saxophone, just to know the key fundamentals of the instrument. That helped me. I rebelled against that at first, because, "Dad. I play drums." He said, "I know. But you'll be a composer too. You have to know the compass of the instruments." You can't just write any note for a trumpet player. You can't give him a triple-high C. You'll have to pump him up with a pump to get a triple-high C. Cat Anderson wouldn't even be able to do it. So you have to know something about the instrument. So I did that. So when I would write an arrangement, I would know the compass of the saxophones, the compass of the brass, what to do with the rhythm section. I keep that in mind and give the band a rest now and then. I asked Harry James once why he liked Ernie Wilkins's arrangements, his Basie arrangements. He said, "Because he writes the greatest rests in the world." In other words, you can be on "The Tonight Show." Several guys come in with arrangements that the players couldn't play. They had to circle certain notes. It was too busy. They had trumpet players way up in the upper octaves, and no rests. All they need is to call 9-1-1. They're trying to play this arrangement. So Doc had to circle certain portions of the arrangement. I know what to do with giving guys rests now and then. Also, if it's a big-band arrangement, I don't start off with a *ff*. Sometimes, but most of the time, [?] playing, there's no place for [?], I just go after that. If they keep that up, that *ff*, the chops are gone.

I had an experience. Remember direct-to-disc music? You had to play four tunes in a row without making a mistake. If you played three of them and made a mistake, you had to start all over again. My trumpet section had blisters in their lips after that. The recordings came out great, but we worked the guys to death – too much. So I know, writing arrangements. I keep all those things in my mind. Also, if I'm writing an alto solo, I've got to make sure that my lead alto player is a guy that ad libs too. You have to know all those things. I know all those things ahead of time before I write an arrangement.

Kimery: We have to change tapes.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: When we pick up, I'm going to ask about writing . . .

[recording interrupted; it resumes in mid-sentence]

Bellson: . . . 18 years old.

Brown: And how about these?

Bellson: I just wrote this for a friend of mine that comes down to rehearsals. He heard about it. I said, "I'll write it out for you."

Kimery: Tape 5.

Brown: Tape 5 of the Louie Bellson . . .

[recording interrupted]

Okay. Let's re-[?] that.

Bellson: I've got a copy of that right here.

[recording interrupted]

Brown: Continuing with the Louie Bellson oral history interview at his house in San Jose. This is tape 5, Louie Bellson being interviewed by Anthony Brown and Ken Kimery.

We were talking about arranging. You were expounding on writing for big bands, but you also wrote for strings as well. Can you talk about what challenges are posed by that and your approaches to writing for strings?

Bellson: When I met Buddy Baker, the first thing he told me, he says, "If you want to write about strings, you've got to remember one thing: strings don't swing." You can't write notes for them like you would for saxophones, because they're not going to play it with that feel. Even if you give them like a dotted-eighth followed by a sixteenth-note [Bellson sings a swing rhythm], they're going to play it [Bellson sing a straight rhythm]. And if you give it to them like a triplet with a rest in between, that kind of rolling triplet feel, they're still not going to play it right. They just don't swing. So I learned to give them half notes, quarter notes, whole notes, especially on ballads and things. But when they have to play a series of eighth notes, they're going to play them exactly the way it's written, whereas swing players interpret it with a bounce feel. So I was very cautious. In other words, if I had to play something like [Bellson sings the melody of *Undecided*], I

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center

give that to the saxophones or trumpets. But the strings, they would play it [Bellson sings *Undecided* with a straight rhythm rather than a swing rhythm]. Like Clark Terry said, “No ta-ta. Boo-ya.” We were doing a clinic together, Clark Terry and I – by the way, he’s one of the greatest clinicians ever, besides being one of the greatest trumpet players ever. So the high school kids were playing *In the Mood*. They were playing it [Bellson sings the melody in a straight rhythm]. Clark looked at me and says, “What to you say, Lou?” I said, “You got it.” He said, “No ta-ta. Boo-ya,” and he played it for them on the horn. That made a world of difference. The kids grasped that feel right away.

But writing for strings, you’ve got to be very careful, especially if you’re using strings in a context with a big band, like Artie Shaw had a big band with strings for a while. He made sure that the strings – the writing for the strings – would not conflict with that side of the band. Give them some things that they can play. So I learned fast. I learned that from Buddy Baker.

Brown: Were there any other people who influenced the way you write for strings?

Bellson: Yeah, there was a gentleman by the name of – what’s the? – the governor in London. He just passed away. He wrote arrangements for Tony Bennett.

Brown: In London?

Bellson: Yeah. I’ll think of it as we go along.

Brown: We were talking about arranging. Then while we had the tape change, we talked about some of your other pursuits as well: publishing, for one thing. You pulled out a recent publication entitled *Their Time was the Greatest*. It’s a collection of your – “Louie Bellson honors 12 super-drummers.” Can you talk about this project and why you selected these particular gentlemen to represent the art form of drumming? What were your criteria for selecting them?

Bellson: This idea came to me years ago, to be able to give the students a chance to play with a band. If they don’t otherwise have the luxury of having a band right there, then this would serve as something that they would have. It’s got the charts written in there. Like for instance, *Hallelujah* was a thing that Buddy Rich played. So I talked about the arrangement. On the CD, my playing is muffled almost completely. It gives the drummer a chance to play along with the band. The chart is in there. I’ve got Buddy Rich, *Hallelujah*. *Liza*, by Chick Webb. Remember that one?

Brown: Oh yeah. Definitely. Here’s also someone who played with brushes. I was listening to a live recording of *Brownsville Stomp* - I think it’s the title – and he was playing *Liza*, and it was with brushes. He’s driving a whole big band. We talked about this yesterday. I had never heard that before.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bellson: Who played it?

Brown: Chick Webb.

Bellson: Oh yeah.

Brown: The live recording of *Liza*. Amazing. He's driving that whole band with brushes. Unbelievable.

Bellson: This has worked out real good, because it gives the drummer a chance to look at a chart and play it – put the headset on and play it with the band. They muffle my part way down, but not completely out. The drummer can play the chart and hear me a little bit, enough to realize what I did, how I followed the chart.

Brown: You play in the style of each one of these different drummers?

Bellson: Yeah.

Brown: You've got Dennis Chambers and Steve Gadd in there as well?

Bellson: Right, Dennis Chambers. We've got Steve Gadd, Buddy Rich, Chick Webb, Big Sid Catlett, Jo Jones, Max Roach, Tony Williams.

Brown: We didn't talk about Tony Williams yesterday. You were talking all the – a lot of drummers, but Tony Williams's name didn't come up. Do you want to talk about Tony now and why you included him?

Bellson: Yeah. The guy was a natural player, original. The last time I saw him, he said, "I'm getting two bass drums." I said, "Don't do it. You don't need it." He was – like Elvin Jones, he added something new to the drum set. He had another voice going. Tremendous.

Brown: How would you describe what was distinctive about his style or his approach, Tony Williams?

Bellson: Avant-garde to the point where he realized what free form was, because the word "form" was still there. He could still swing hard. He could do it all. But his approach, his sound – his sound was different than anyone else's, too.

Elvin was the same way. You could tell by listening to him – probably you could tell that sound. We talked about an 18-inch bass drum. He made it sound like a 26-inch bass drum. I went to hear him play once. He played – he had a brush in his right hand. He

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



went to hit a *ff* with a cymbal with a brush and a bass drum. It sounded like a cannon going off. He had more strength – you ever shake hands with him? You could hear the bones cracking.

Great story about Elvin Jones, Buddy Rich, and myself. I was in London with Oscar Peterson. Buddy was there with his big band. Buddy Rich called me and said, “Elvin’s down playing at Ronnie Scott’s. Let’s go catch him tonight.” “Okay.” So we went down. Elvin’s drums were where you are sitting, and Buddy and I were sitting right here – that close. Buddy kept saying, “How’s he get a sound out of that little bass drum? To me, I can’t reason that out.”

Anyway, Elvin played the set. He was sweating like mad. After the set was over, Buddy said, “Let’s go back and pay our respects.” So we went back to the dressing room. Elvin picked up Buddy and hugged him. When he set him down, all the sweat that was on Elvin went on Buddy Rich’s suede jacket. Buddy said he couldn’t clean the suede jacket any more. He had to put it up. It belongs to Elvin Jones. It was funny though.

Brown: Buddy would sweat a lot too. I’ve seen Buddy many times. He really – the sweat was pouring out of him as well.

Bellson: There was enough, like somebody’s poured a pail of water on him, and all of that went on Buddy’s suede jacket. That was funny.

Tony Williams created something. Watching and listening to him play reminded me of a quote that four bandleaders told me to tell students. Basie used to say, “Tell your students to listen. Learn how to listen.” Harry James – or Duke used to say, “Make sure that they find some identification.” In other words, when you hear them play, you know that that’s Sonny Greer, that’s Jo Jones, that’s Shelly Manne, that’s Buddy Rich. Develop your own style, your own sound. Duke said, “Make them invent their own being.” That’s what he used to say. Harry James used to say, “Make sure that they have their own sound.” And somebody else – let’s see. Who else? It wasn’t Lionel. It was Cab Calloway. He used to tell me, “Tell them to find the groove and stay with it,” which I thought was interesting. But Basie’s was just one word: tell them to listen. That says it all.

In reference to – I made that point for some reason. What was I talking about before?

Brown: What was distinctive about Tony Williams and Elvin Jones?

Bellson: Yeah, Tony.

Brown: We talked about Tony first.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: In Tony Williams I found he listens. He knows how to establish a groove. Definitely knows how to do that. And he had his own approach to playing cymbals and the sound of the drums. Those two guys were able to say that their invention of the drum set was something really important.

Brown: We're all drummers in this room, and when we look back at what happened in the '60s, the development of jazz is pretty much shaped by what Tony Williams and Elvin Jones did at that time.

Bellson: That's right.

Brown: You have other drummers on there as well. You have Shelly Manne. How would you – what would you say is distinctive about Shelly's styling?

Bellson: I've got Steve Gadd there, Shelly Manne.

Brown: So what was distinctive about Shelly?

Bellson: Shelly was a very – played with a lot of taste. He was never a so-called big-band drummer. He could do it, but he favored playing in small groups. Great with brushes. With the sticks he had a nice touch. Never got in the way. Musical. He was a musical player.

Steve Gadd was – I just heard him play last week. That young man can do anything. He can play in any groove. He goes on the road with James Taylor, and it's a certain way of playing. Got his own group, Gadd Gang. Plays in it, bebop style. He can play with rock-and-roll guys. He can do it all. Gets a great touch. He's done his homework. He knows the instrument. He's somebody that is really thorough.

Brown: As we were discussing yesterday, he also was a tap-dancer. You talked about being a Mouseketeer.

Bellson: Right. He was a Mouseketeer. He doesn't want to be reminded of that, but he was. Mickey Mouse and him are a distance away, but he was a Mouseketeer. There's a video out called *Time Grooves* that Harold Farberman put out. The drummers are Steve Gadd, Alex Acuña, Harvey Mason, Vic Firth playing tympani, and David Friedman playing xylophone, and myself. Steve and I do a time-step, and I do a sand on that *Time Grooves*. Did you know about that one?

Brown: The sand-step?

Bellson: No. Did you know about that video?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Brown: No. I don't know about that video.

Bellson: That didn't do much, because on it, beside all these great players, there's a thing called *Hansel and Gretel* where this little girl goes through this – it has nothing to do with the rest of the album. That's why it didn't sell, because they wondered, what's this little girl doing among all these monsters in here? It was done well, but the connection didn't work, didn't jell. It's called *Time Grooves*.

Brown: We'll definitely look for it. Actually, when we leave here, we're going to a record store and get that James Brown. So we'll look for this one too.

You also have Dennis Chambers. He seems to be the youngest of the . . .

Bellson: Dennis Chambers.

Brown: . . . group there.

Bellson: There's another guy that's a fabulous player. When I first heard him, I thought to myself, wow, cyclone is here. Fabulous drummer. Technique coming out of his ears, but yet a good player with a band.

One of my earliest experiences with him, I was in Europe. I was having dinner with – Benny Carter, I think it was. Lo and behold, here comes a car. Dennis Chambers. He yelled out to me. He says, "I've got to see you. I need to see you." I said, "Okay. I'm staying here at this hotel." He drove on by. I got a phone call from him the next day. He said, "What are you doing this afternoon?" "Nothing. Come on over." I said, "What's your problem?" He says, "I don't know how to read." I said, "You don't need to learn how to read. The way you play, you don't need to. I'm glad you don't read." He said, "No. Seriously. I want to learn how to read." I had some books with me. I took him right from the beginning. What's a whole note? What's a half note? What's a quarter note? What's an eighth note, sixteenth note? What's a tie? Here's a pattern of half notes, quarter notes, and eighth notes. I'll play it for you. Watch out for – I went through a whole book with him in two and a half hours. He learned the entire book in that time. That's how quick he was. So I told him – I said, "See. It's not hard to learn how to read." You don't say the word "hard." Drummers don't talk about hard. We talk about having to get something and go practice it and do it. Hard becomes something that stays in your head, and it's hard for you to get rid of that word. I gathered that from my father. I never tell my students this is hard. If it's something that's demanding, I say, "Here's a nice piece of music. Take it home, learn it, and have fun with it." That takes all the hardness away from it. It makes it simple.

Brown: You're touching on one of the most valuable contributions you've made to the art of drumming, and that is as an educator through all the experience and the wisdom

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



that you've brought to the art-form. We're now talking about your publications. I want to go back to the very beginning. You have here, for the record – it says Bellson Music Company from Moline, Illinois. It's a picture of you on a drum set, and inside you have some exercises. When I brought out this book yesterday – *Modern Reading Texts in 4/4*, published by Bellwin Mills, authored by yourself – Louie Bellson – and Gil Brines – is that correct, Brines or Breenes?

Bellson: Gil Bri-nes [pronounced as a two-syllable surname and with a soft “i”].

Brown: Brines. Okay. When I brought this out, you said, “These were exercises I was working with way back when I was either a teen or a youngster.”

Bellson: That's right.

Brown: So let's talk about what motivated you to get into writing books and exercises and things, and did you do that for yourself initially?

Bellson: When I was working for my dad in the music store, I noticed that there wasn't too much material in those days for drums. It was always, here's how you hold the left hand, the right hand. They didn't even talk about matched grip then. It was all conventional grip. So I decided to write some exercises that would help drummers – not only drummers, but brass instrument players and reed players, because rhythm is part of their lives too. So I wrote 400 pages on 4/4 only, 400 pages on 3/4 only, 400 pages on 2/4. Then I got into complex odd times. The reason Gil Birnes name is on there is he condensed those down to maybe a hundred pages each book, or less than that? I don't know how many pages are in the book.

Brown: A little less than a hundred: 91 in this one. That's *Modern Reading Texts*. And then the *Odd Time Reading Texts*, there are – it seems like a few more. Yeah. There's about 129, 130 pages here.

Bellson: He didn't disturb my writing at all. All he did was just said, “Lou, pick out 100 pages.” I said, “You put that together.” But it's for all instruments. In fact the first guy that can buy that book in 4/4 was [William] Vacchiano, the lead trumpet player with the New York Philharmonic. When I heard that, I said wow, because it was rhythm, ba-dop ba da-dop ba da-dop ba da-dop ba da-dop. That could be played by saxophones, trumpets, trombones. So that book – I still work on that book myself.

Brown: This was the first book that I was given by my first teacher, Ron Falter, who studied with you. What was interesting about this was that it's not a book per se about drum technique. It's about reading, developing the very thing that you were able to impart to Dennis Chambers. So I think that that's why it's so universal in its application. You get trumpet players playing it, drummers. Of course drummers are the ones who are

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

saddled with reading probably the most complicated rhythms, but it's really to develop your reading skills rather than your drumming skills. It's developed rhythmic acuity. So that's a whole different focus that you're bringing to the study of this art form. You're broadening – again, a much broader palette than just focusing on drum technique. You're looking at the whole concept of rhythm and how to have people become more proficient at that.

Bellson: That's right. I used to tell my students, actually learn everything in this book – exercise – now, let's permutate. Play with the right hand the rhythm, and keep the bass drum going on all four beats, or keep the bass drum going on 1 and 2. That's adding the drum set. Or play the left hand the rhythm and then the bass drum. So there's different ways of enlarging that, playing it. It was very successful for all instruments.

Originally, Benny Goodman, he used to say, “Brass and rhythm section, don't pull out a magazine on me. Sit up and listen. I don't need you now, but listen to me. Five saxophone players, start at letter A. Here we go. No rhythm. Just five saxophone players.” He had them playing impeccable time. They didn't need a bass player, a drummer. Alone. Now he says, “Saxophones, take a break. Brass – trumpets and trombones – same thing. Letter A.” He had them swinging. Because Benny Goodman thought – in the days that he was younger, kids used to say, “Something's screwed up. The drummer slowed down.” The drummer's say, “I didn't slow down. The band slowed down.” All the pressure was on the drummer. It's not the drummer's fault, because the trombone player maybe was playing da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-dat [at a steady tempo] da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da [slowing down]. He's slowed down already.

So he rules the band. Then he put the brass with the reeds. They didn't need a rhythm section. They were swinging. By the time he put the whole thing together, you can't get any better than that.

Brown: So that's the way Benny Goodman rehearsed the band.

Bellson: That's the way Benny Goodman rehearsed the band. Yeah. It made a lot of sense, because everybody has to learn how to play in time. It used to drive him crazy to see one guy, one saxophone player playing this tempo and his foot's going like this. Benny says, “What are you doing? Get rid of that rhythm down there. If you're going to tap your foot, tap it in time.” But that's true. Did you ever notice that?

Kimery: Also [?], being in the drum chair itself, the interpretation of time between the sax section and the trumpet section was a totally different zone there, and you have to somehow hold them together and make sense of where the time is. It can be just really – for the drummer and the rhythm section – really pulling air, trying to get them to play

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



together. It's wonderful to have a band that plays together. You don't have that challenge there.

Bellson: That's right. Benny's band could always swing. Everybody played in time.

Brown: Yesterday you made the statement about bands that you considered swing bands. You mentioned Duke and Count Basie, of course. Then you mentioned – this is when you were talking about your experience with Goodman – you mentioned him. Later on, you said Charlie Barnet as well. But you did say Glenn Miller was not a swing band. Why did you exclude him from that category?

Bellson: Benny told me that one day when I was talking – Benny Goodman – he said – first of all, that was the most successful band as far as making money was concerned. It was a good band. No question about it. They played well. They played dance music, a certain kind of dance music that's just vanilla. It was okay, but it wasn't a swing band like Ellington or Basie, where you got in some grooves. It wasn't designed that way. They played beautiful ballads. But it wasn't a swing band. Swing bands were Duke, Basie, Lionel Hampton, Cab Calloway, Jimmie Lunceford. These were the bands that really – Charlie Barnet and Benny Goodman were the white bands, so to speak. Charlie Barnet was a disciple of Duke too. He loved Duke. But they got in the groove. They knew what that groove was. It's like talking about piano players. When Art Tatum and Oscar Peterson play, they found the groove. They did everything. The technique and the groove and the whole bit was there. As opposed to maybe somebody like Carmen Cavallaro – a great piano player, more in a concert style, but not swinging.

Brown: How about Artie Shaw's band?

Bellson: Artie Shaw, yeah. Artie Shaw was a good swing band too. You'd include him in that.

Brown: How about Stan Kenton?

Bellson: Stan Kenton, to me, was – I don't know how to classify him. He always had a good band. But to me, Stan Kenton's band – the trumpet players like Buddy Childers, developed hernia at an early age from playing all those high notes. Shelly Manne used to come home rubbing his hands like a boxer, because he had to roll on a big cymbal as loud as he could, and that wasn't loud enough. He had to play way over fortissimo. It was a good band, but I wouldn't say it was – it started to swing when Bill Holman started writing for the band and they had Mel Lewis on drums and Conte Candoli and Frank Rosolino. That's when it started to swing, because Bill Holman's writing developed another way for Stan. That band, I would say it would be a swing band. The other arrangements they did before that were good, but they weren't classified as swing – good concert pieces.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Brown: We were talking about your career as an author and working in the field of the education of music. I have a book that I don't know if you were familiar with coming up. I found these probably about 20 years ago in a used book store. It's called *The Science of Drumming*, book 1 and 2, by Gene Krupa. Are you familiar with either – with this book?

Bellson: Yes I am. Gene was another example of a guy that didn't read too much. I didn't know that. I thought he was well schooled, even though he studied something with Roy Knapp, but he had problems with reading too. In fact we made a video and a book called *The Mighty Two*. You know about that one? It's Gene Krupa and myself. I went up to his house in Yonkers and spent a week with him. We did all the rudiments to swing time. The band was – Ron Carter was the bass player. Barry Harris was the piano player. Phil Wood was the alto player. Jimmy Cleveland, the trombone player. All those all stars. I wrote the arrangements for all of the 26 rudiments to swing time, and I taught it to Gene up at his house.

But I think he – I don't think he wrote that all by himself. I think [?], the guy that wrote the . . .

Brown: Sam Rowland? Edited by Sam Rowland, maybe? No?

Bellson: There's another book that Gene got his name on, [?] that – *The Rudimental Art* – put it together for him. But I guess Gene looked at this in the final analysis. But he grabbed hold of it. All you had to do was show him once and he had it.

Brown: Also Buddy had problems reading too.

Bellson: Yeah.

Brown: I don't think he read music. It must have been pretty much the case back in those days. Most drummers didn't read. Of course I think Cozy Cole was another sterling example like yourself, who probably was a well-rounded musician. I know that Gene and Cozy Cole had hooked up and a drum school together.

Bellson: Cozy could read good. Buddy and Gene weren't too good at reading. They could read some simple things, but I don't think Buddy could read at all. In talking to Buddy throughout the years, I used to try to get him to – because he used to go by a piano and do two-fingered piano, just playing. I said, "You ever think of writing music?" He said, "Yeah, but I don't know who to go to." He said, "You're busy. You're on the road all the time." I said, "Yeah." I said, "You fool around with the vibes. I think you always wanted to do that." But he never gave himself a chance to learn it. He would have been good at it, because as great a player as he was, he would know what to do with vibes and piano, rhythm section.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Chick Webb didn't read, but yet he could hear an arrangement and sing all the notes for you. If he ever decided to get into tympani and mallets, he'd go upwards so fast it would be ridiculous. Big Sid Catlett could read a little bit. Jo Jones could read a little bit. But most of those players were just great God-given talent.

Brown: I know the Ellington band – Ellington used to keep people like Bubber Miley and other folks who were not readers – basically, ear players – in the band. When you were in the band in the '50s, were there – I guess reading was a prerequisite to being in that band? I guess Sonny must have read, but I don't know. You say there were no charts, so I guess it wasn't necessary.

Bellson: Yeah, they were good readers. They had problems – personal problems – reading somebody else's score. Maybe it might have too many notes in it. But they played Duke's music good. But they were good readers, because they did an album with Rosemary Clooney. They did one with Tony Bennett. They were all reading.

Brown: Speaking about Duke, let's go back to the '60s, just to change up on the subject, but we'll return again talking about your other activities and other drummers. I believe you're on that recording with Duke. You did several projects with Duke. I know the Sacred Concert in '65 at Grace Cathedral. I believe that that was another high point. Were you also on the recording when Duke did the Boston Pops and he brought in a trio? Were you on that one as well?

Bellson: Yeah. I did Tanglewood with him. Right.

Brown: How was that experience?

Bellson: The only – he just used the bass player John Lamb and myself. That was – I had a lot of respect for . . .

Brown: Arthur Fiedler?

Bellson: Arthur Fiedler, because he got John Lamb and I together in a room and said, "I'm not going to conduct my lousy 4/4 with my hand. You guys know the tempos. I'm going to follow you." That was good to hear, because I played in a couple of symphonies and the symphony conductor was rigid to the point where there were zero. They didn't listen to the drums or the piano or the bass or the guitar. They went on ahead with their hands. They're all out of time, and stiff. Fiedler made a motion, but he followed us. I gave him a lot of respect for that. That was wonderful.

Brown: How about the Sacred Concert where you were brought back to . . .?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bellson: The first Sacred Concert was [at] Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. I knew that cathedral. It was all stone. So in my mind I'm saying, boy, if I hit a rim shot in that room, I could go out and have dinner, come back, and it's still in the room. So I talked to Duke about that. Duke said, "Yeah. You know, I played with my band for years. We would learn to play for what kind of room we're in. If we're playing in a room where it was a lot of glass, then we pointed horns away from the glass and pointed – find the spot." Snooky Young could do that. He found the spot where he could be better with his sound. Duke said, "What you're going to have to do is listen with your playing. Also, you know that my music is based on the first three words of the Bible, 'in the beginning.' In the beginning we had lightning and thunder. That's you, Lou." "I'm no longer a drum solo in a church." That's what I thought first. I thought, in those days, if I was playing a drum solo in a church – if you're a gospel band, that's different. So Duke says, "Let me digest that." He says, "Lightning and thunder now."

I don't know if you heard that first Grace Cathedral concert. There's a long drum solo in there in the beginning. I kept that in mind. I made my phrases like I was lightning and thunder. Duke could do that. He could climb into your body and make you kick. If you joined the band, he'd find out what you can do, the best things you can do, and he'd write for you. That's why he could learn to write for Lawrence Brown, learn to write for Johnny Hodges, Harry Carney, Paul Gonsalves, Russell Procope. He knew what to do.

Brown: For Duke, this is one of the works that he reflected on in his autobiography. He referred to his Sacred Concert as the most important music to him. Did he talk a lot about the music before he actually performed it? How did the piece – how was the piece developed for performance?

Bellson: I think Duke had already started years ago. For example, he took one – he was famous for taking one tune and making it – Harry Carney played the melody. Then a year later, he'd write another arrangement, the same tune, but don't have Harry Carney. Just have Ray Nance do it. Same tune. In other words, he's able to get more mileage out of one tune than anybody I ever knew. So what he did with *Come Sunday*, for example, with the beautiful ballad. He used that for *David Danced* for Bunny Briggs, where the rhythm section's playing double-time [Bellson sings this melody while tapping a double-time tempo as accompaniment]. That was an example of what he did with – he wrote that a long time ago. He'd been gathering material off and on for a long time. He finally put the pieces together and made his sacred music.

Brown: That was a pretty gigantic production. He had the chorus. He had the singers, the band. Who was – was Duke really the mastermind, and was he the grand orchestrator for the production, or were there other people there as well to help with the choir?

Bellson: I think he – the only one he confided in was Strayhorn, because he knew Strayhorn was going to be exactly like what he's thinking too. So when they did *His*

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center

Mother Called Him Billy, Duke had a hand in that too, but he gave all the credit to Strayhorn. I think Duke masterminded the whole thing. He was the perfect conductor too, because he let them know what was coming next by the way he was playing on the piano, and he was great with the tempos.

One thing – when the *Black, Brown and Beige* CD came out, we had problems with it. I recommended three people. I recommended Clark Terry, because he was in the original. I recommended Joe Williams to sing the blues part. You couldn't get anybody better than that. And I recommended Maurice Perez. He knew that piece backwards. But Maurice Perez didn't know tempos like Duke knew his tempos. So during rehearsals we got in a little confrontation there between Maurice Perez and myself with the rhythm section. I said, "Maurice, you know this piece better than I do, but I know the tempos better than you do. I know the tempos that Duke wanted it." We finally ironed it out. He's a real gentleman. He came to me later on and said, "You're right. I've got to listen to you when it comes to tempos." That to me spells a good musician when you can do that, open your eyes and ears. Because he knows that music.

Brown: So that whole experience with Duke's sacred concerts inspired you as well to write your sacred music suite.

Bellson: Absolutely. Because Duke came to me after we played Grace Cathedral and the one in New York. Duke said, "Lou, you should do a sacred music of your own. You write and you compose. There's no reason why you can't do your own sacred music. You're a religious person." The only difference is that Duke's sacred concert is based on the first testament, on God. Mine is on the second testament, involving Jesus, although my first number is *No One but God*. But after that it talks about Jesus, the motivator to get to God.

So he inspired me to do that. We have a CD. It's ready to go now, with efforts by the USC big band with strings and USC choir. John Thomas was the contractor for it, a trumpet player. Francine has really made the thing come to life. She's taken the pictures. She came in for the concert. She wrote the liner notes. Francine put the whole thing together. Coordinated the pictures, the amount of time that each number took. That's a monumental job in itself right there, producing. She produced it, the CD. We're talking to some people now about doing it ourselves and getting an outfit out of Nashville that has distribution power through all the churches all over the country in stores that sell music of this kind.

I've tried to inflect a little bit of jazz – a little bit of music – a little groove music in there with a religious tone, because that's what Duke did.

Brown: He's still influencing you to this day.

Bellson: Yeah. That's right.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Brown: Let's talk about the other great influence in your life, since you brought her up: Francine. When did you meet Francine? How did you come together?

Bellson: On a cruise. This was a cruise that started in L.A., went up to Vancouver, British Columbia, and back to L.A. Leonard Feather called it the Ellington cruise. Most of the guys – Buster Cooper was on it. In fact Buster Cooper's the one that introduced me to Francine. The cruise was in October – some time in October – and I had to tell Leonard Feather, "I can't make it. I got a date booked already at that time." He said, "You got to make it." I said, "Let me call up these people I'm supposed to – see if I can cancel my gig and do it later on." As luck would have it, that happened. The guy said, "Yeah, we can do it later" – the beginning of the year instead of October. Otherwise I would have missed meeting Francine.

I got on the ship. We played. All of a sudden I saw this lady walking back and forth on the ship, and Buster Cooper introduced me to her. When I heard that she was working for IBM – I was always afraid in my early years that writing music, and having a fire or a flood happen, and there was a lifetime of work gone down the tubes. My brother used to have an outdoor garage. I used to keep my music in there. I used to dream of rats getting in there and chewing up my notes. When I heard IBM and Francine, I said, "I want to talk to you," but I didn't tell her what was in the back of my mind otherwise, not only about the music, but she was looking good to me. So I told her, "Is there some way I can put this in a computer or do something to save it?" "Yes, there is." So we got into that. I didn't meet her until the last few days. It was a week-long cruise. I met her and started talking to her the last couple of days. I had one more visit with her. Buddy Baker was on that tour – on the ship. When I left her, I said, "I'll be calling you." She had a birthday coming up, October 17th. I sent her a whole bunch of flowers, and I called her every day. In fact, my phone calls – I went to Europe right after that, and my phone calls were an hour and a half long, calling from Europe to L.A. When I finally got my telephone bills from the hotels, they were like \$2,500 this day, \$2,500 this day. So I finally got back to the States. We made arrangements to get engaged, because she says, "I don't fool around." She said, "Either we're going to get engaged to get married, or say goodbye, Charlie." I said, "Let's do it."

Brown: What year was this?

Bellson: That was in 2000 . . . – let me see. I met her – the cruise was 19 – a year and a half after Pearl died.

Brown: So '91, '92?

Bellson: About '91 or '92, yeah. I had no eyes to get married. After 39 years with Pearl, I could tell you, "No marriage. I'm going to play my drums, write my music. That'll keep

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



me busy. That's it." But the good Lord has his way of doing things. So, the last couple of days, and then that time I was in Europe. I came back, and her father – a very religious man, too – we decided, let's get engaged and get married. So we did. She went to her employer, IBM. [They] said, "Francine, you've got a problem here. If you're going to get married, that's fine. But you can't expect to take a week off here when Lou's going off somewhere to do a date and you're going to accompany him. You can't do that. You can't take a week off here and a week there and a week – before you'd know it, he'd be on the road with you all the time. I suggest you do a buyout," because at that time IBM was going down quite a bit. To take a buyout was smart, because you'd get a taste of a bonus, because, look at the future, there was no future. They were going to hire and fire a lot of people.

So Francine got the bright idea, "Why don't I go with you, and I'll start selling some of your things, like CDs?" So she started doing – she made her own business out of that. So that made it an opportunity to be together. She's got her business going, and I've got my business going. She's an excellent saleswoman. She could sell my drawers, if I had them for sale.

Brown: You might want to end on that one.

Kimery: 10 more minutes.

Brown: Okay. We could continue. What date did you get married?

Bellson: September the 26th, 19. . .

Brown: 1992?

Bellson: It was a year and a half after Pearl. '92. I have to think about it. The years go by so fast. '92. September 26th. We've been married 13 years as of this last September 26th.

Brown: You were married here in California, or where were you married?

Bellson: Yeah. Right here at our church, Emmanuel Baptist Church.

Brown: Where's Francine from originally?

Bellson: She's from Washington, D.C., but she spent a lot of time out here, because of IBM, and she worked for a couple of other firms before IBM – for 14 years at IBM. She worked in the department, they made those big computers, giant computers.

Kimery: We'll stop here.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Brown: Okay.

This is tape six of the jazz oral history interview for the Smithsonian Institution with Louie Bellson in his home in San Jose. We're on tape six. We've covered quite a lot of history here, but there's still quite a lot more to go. One of the real significant achievements in your career is that relationship you had with Remo Belli, in you shaping the direction of drum manufacturing. If you could talk about how you and Remo met, and how that relationship came about.

Bellson: Remo is a good drummer himself. He played with Billy May's band at the height of Billy May's career. He also played for Betty Hutton. In fact, in those days, that's when I met Remo. He came to me in Las Vegas. He said, "Give me some money." I said, "For what?" He said, "I've got an idea for a plastic drumhead." I said, "Plastic drumhead?" That sounded strange. But he was working with this man that knows about plastics, and they came up with this plastic drumhead. "I want you as part of the company. I want you to invest some money in the company."

Brown: What year was that?

Bellson: Let's see. I have to go back to – 45 – we're almost 50 years together, so that would be . . .

Brown: Mid- to late '50s. 1950s. It goes back that far?

Bellson: Yeah. It goes back even before that, around the early '50s.

Brown: So you gave him the money?

Bellson: I gave him the money.

Brown: Do you remember how much you gave him?

Bellson: Yeah. I gave him \$1,000.

Brown: Really? Wow. That's a lot of money in the early '50s.

Bellson: Right. So then he says, "Okay." Then periodically in the next few months, the next few years, he'd say to me, "Give me another thousand, another thousand." So I did, and then the company started happening. Plastic heads started coming out and gained a lot of prominence. It was a good sound, because guys now could play outdoors, in the rain, in fact. When you did that with a calfskin head, you were good for a certain beat, and that's it. That was the end of it. Guys like Shelly Manne, who was strictly a calfskin player, didn't come in right away with the plastic head, but later on he said, "I should

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



have done this a long time ago.” He said, “This is great.” Remo came up with the idea. Even today he’s the number one head maker of everybody else. He’s also involved in making sets of drums. He’s also very prominent in ethnic percussion: African instruments, hand drums, djembes, cubanos. That’s his biggest project now. He became a millionaire just handling that kind of stuff.

I bought more shares as the years went by. Then he made me a vice-president about 20 years ago, not knowing how to run the business, but he used me as a guinea pig to try out new ideas. Even today, he calls me, we have lunch together, and we talk about how good God’s been to us. Here – we talked about retiring in 1985, and here it is, 2005, and we’re still going. I don’t do much with the company any more as far as inventing new ideas. He’ll call me and say, “What do you think of this?” But everything’s been thought about so far.

He has what they call a drum circle. The main factory now is in Valencia, a beautiful factory. And then they maintain a big area at Coldwater in North Hollywood. They have a drum circle there every Tuesday and Thursday. People come in – not necessarily drummers. Just people – come in with their hand drums, conga drums, djembes, and all kinds of rhythm instruments. They have somebody like Leon Mobley, who’s a good conga drummer – have him conduct the affair. For an hour and a half, or two hours, they have a ball just playing rhythms. It’s great. I think Mickey Hart did that with the Grateful Dead. It was very successful. There were thousands of people, playing hand drums. Everybody’s involved. So that’s going strong for him now.

He married a young Filipino lady who’s a doctor. He’s learned to eat health foods and be on a health kick. He goes to all of these big world health programs, learns what to do, because he’s almost up to my age. He’s 79?, maybe – 78, 79. He’s always aware of what to eat. Gets up every morning and walks at 6 o’clock in the morning. He – the right medicine from his wife. He’s got a vineyard of his own in Pasa Robles. Eventually, that’s what he wants to do: live in Cambria and have his vineyard in Pasa Robles – become a farmer. But he’s too active in going to the PAS – Percussive Arts Society. That’s one thing he was a founder of. You know about the PAS, of course. This year they’re honoring Steve Gadd. He goes to that. He goes to the big NAMM [National Association of Music Merchants] shows they have in L.A., where everybody shows up, all the marketers.

He’s been like a brother to me. He’s been my best man at my wedding here at Emmanuel Baptist Church. We still do a lot of things together. We’re able to – he came on a tour with me with Norman Granz, a six-week tour. We had Dizzy there, Zoot Sims, Oscar Peterson, Ray Brown, Ella, all the biggies. He came. He paid his way, flew with us for six concerts – more than six concerts, because sometimes we did one concert in Paris and flew to Italy to do another concert, all in the same day. It was six weeks altogether. Remo remembers that, being associated with all those great players, living with them. He stayed

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



at the same hotel with us, where he had coffee and dinner with Oscar. What could be better than that? He's been a great part of my life. We still – like when I get back in town, we'll have lunch together and talk over, "What's up? What are you doing now? What's next?"

Brown: It's great to have lifelong friends. That's tremendous.

Bellson: He still gets stars, like Jeff Hamilton is one of his main people, handles his drums. Jeff Hamilton is a fabulous drummer, by the way. We all know that. When I see him now, I say, "Don't get too good, because you're good enough. You're better than good now. Stop it." A great guy. Can play with a trio, a quartet, big band. They've got that big band going – Clayton-Hamilton band. He's got his own trio. A master with the brushes. He can do anything.

Brown: Let's talk about other younger drummers, then. You were talking about drummers. I've got an LP here called *The Matterhorn: the Louie Bellson Drum Explosion*. You've got two drum sets on the cover. The liner notes describe the project. The other drummer's always referred to as "the other drummer." But when one puts it on – if Ken or I or you put it on, we can tell who that other drummer is.

Bellson: Yeah, that's Billy Cobham.

Brown: Right. So can you talk about this project and why he never go mentioned?

Bellson: Sure. I got to know Billy Cobham. I found him to be a wonderful person, very warm, and a great drummer. When he started with [John] McLaughlin . . .

Brown: The Mahavishnu Orchestra.

Bellson: Yeah. Doing stuff with the left hand, which I always taught my students, "Learn to play with this hand, too." I got the opportunity to do a three-day clinic with him in Northridge, California. Joel Leach has a band – a great band. We did three days, clinics and workshops and concerts with that band. I wrote a piece – I wrote all the music for Billy and I, and he sight-read that the first time. Sight-read it. I put it in front of him. He played it. A fabulous player. We got so wrapped up with this idea, I said, "Let us record it." So we went to Switzerland together – Lugano, Switzerland. Billy coordinated the whole thing. We used – half of the guys were from Europe, like Benny Bailey, the trumpet player. He had Mike Manieri. He came over from the States. The Brecker brothers, Randy and . . .

Brown: Michael.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: . . . Michael. They both came over. Howard Johnson was playing baritone [saxophone]. Great – he played the whistle too – great band. That’s already – that’s a DVD. You talked about that DVD, Kenny, yesterday?

Kimery: Yeah.

Bellson: That’s where we did that, in Lugano. That was featuring me alone. Then I did the one with Billy Cobham, where it’s titled, *When Cobham Meets Bellson*. We did those in Europe. We decided to do it in California. So I said – I got permission to do it from Norman Granz. Billy Cobham had to call CBS and get an okay from his record people. They said okay. So, after they said okay, we proceeded to take pictures and do the liner notes and do the recording. Near the end of the recording – we had one more day to do – Billy got in some contractual difficulties with CBS, to the point where he said, “You can’t record with anybody else at all.” Billy said, “What about the thing I just did with Louie Bellson?” “No, you can’t do that either.” Already we’re in to \$30,000. So Norman says, “You want to scratch it, Lou?” I said, “No. We can’t scratch this. This is too historic.” He says, “Well” – Norman came up with the idea, why don’t we put the pictures of the drum sets in the front and call it *Matterhorn* and refer to Billy Cobham not as Billy Cobham but “the other drummer.” They can’t balk on that. So that’s how that came about.

It was an exciting moment for me to record with this guy, because he’s a giant. I heard him play not too long ago at Yoshi’s. He had a group of guys from Europe. He still played with all that fire and enthusiasm. Wonderful human being. Great player. I was sad that I couldn’t include his name on that thing with the 12 drummers, because his – not only Billy Cobham, but I wanted to include other guys like Vinnie Colaiuta – other drummers that were coming up, that deserve – you can’t put them all on. So I decided I’ll do a sequel to the – then on the sequel I’ll use Billy Cobham, Vinnie Colaiuta, guys like – young guys coming up now. There’s a young guy. His name is – I just read about him in *Modern Drummer*. Holmes is his last name. Young black kid. He’s only about 17 years old, and already he’s playing rim shots coming out of his butt. He’s a fantastic player. It’s like he’s 60 years old, playing all those good things. So they’re coming up. They’re a lot younger now. They’re practically babies.

Brown: It’s like Tony Williams’s age – 16, 17.

Bellson: That’s right. Tony Williams was a baby. That’s right. Steve Gadd, same way. Buddy Rich was known as “Traps.” He told me – he said he didn’t have any idea of becoming a drummer when he was little. He played in the circuit in the theaters, but he wasn’t interested in pursuing it, becoming a full-fledged drummer. It just happened.

Brown: Have you heard of some of the other drummers coming up, like El Negro Hernandez from Cuba?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bellson: Oh yeah. He's a fantastic drummer. Man. Talking about being mad at somebody. I'm going to break his hands. Because to me, those guys are a full rhythm section within themselves. It used to be, I played the samba and things like that, I had three other guys helping me. Now these guys play a clavé beat with the left foot, and the right foot's doing something different, and the other hand – he's fantastic.

Brown: How about – coming up in age, looking at David Weckl?

Bellson: Dave Weckl's another guy that . . .

Brown: Comes right out of Steve Gadd, the Steve Gadd style.

Bellson: Yeah. Fantastic young players. Gregg Bissonette, there's another one.

Brown: How about some of the older ones, like Ndugu?

Bellson: Ndugu's wonderful. Ndugu's not only a great player, but he's a great teacher. He's now one of the teachers at USC. He conducts a brilliant clinic. He's a fabulous player. He told me that one of the toughest things he had to do – you notice that I said tough, not hard – was playing for Michael Jackson, making the afterbeat the same. It's got to be the same for the whole tune. It can't be a loud rim shot, and then the next one medium loud, the next one soft, the next one loud. It's got to be consistent. But he's a good player, exciting, and also a good player. He's the one that taught me how to say, when the kids ask you how old you are, you tell them – in those days, I was not quite 80 yet – but he taught me how to say, "I'm 40 years old on this leg and 40 years old on this leg, and the middle leg stays constant all the time." He taught me how to say that. So I put that on Ndugu.

Brown: Maybe that generation – have you heard Ralph Peterson?

Bellson: Yes.

Brown: He's a wild man.

Bellson: Yeah, very good.

Brown: Because he was the one that Boo [Art Blakey] said would be the heir to Boo. You haven't talked about Art Blakey.

Bellson: Art Blakey. Dizzy said it. He said, "Max Roach is a professor. Art Blakey is a volcano." One of the most exciting players ever. He has the distinction of being one of the hardest swinging drummers. Also, he's had more stars in his band than anybody who

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

has a big band or a small group. The people that came out of his leadership are many, and all brilliant. He, as a person, was always charming, a lot of fun, and a great, great player. They don't come any hard swingers past Art Blakey.

Brown: That's one of those where he'd swing you into bad health, huh?

Bellson: He could swing you into bad health in a minute. He'll start off the first bar that way. You don't wait until the middle of the tune. He starts off with the first bar: "Bam."

Brown: How about Philly Joe Jones?

Bellson: There's another big talent. He's really a musical player. He digs in to what's happening musically and applies that to his drumming. Gets a nice sound on the drum set. He's genuinely included among the great drummers of all time.

Brown: Did you know him personally? Did you get to know him?

Bellson: I knew him personally, yeah. Absolutely yeah. In fact I played opposite him at Birdland years ago. I learned some things from him too. That's one thing about drummers. We always learn from one another. Buddy Rich made this statement. He said, "Every time I go hear a drummer play – he can be a great drummer, or he can be a guy that's not so great – but I learn something from him. He'll do something that's small, but it's something that you can use. You say, 'yeah, I'm going to do that. That's great.'" Drummers.

Brown: Anybody that we left out? Stan Levey?

Bellson: Stan Levey. He just passed away recently. I got to know him. In fact I saw him in a restaurant there. He was doing – I saw him at the NAM show last year. He was in good health, and boom. He's left-handed. He's lefty. Great drummer. Played with Bird. He had good technique, good swing. He had to be able to swing, playing with those guys. He also sounded good in a big band. I caught him with Stan Kenton's band. He was able to come up with the volume. He was with that swing band, the one that I talked about earlier, where . . .

Brown: Bill Holman was doing arrangements.

Bellson: . . . Bill Holman wrote arrangements. Made the band swing.

Brown: How about Don Lamond.

Bellson: Don Lamond, another great player. I used to see Don Lamond – he comes from Washington, D.C., by the way. Did you know that, Ken?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: I didn't.

Bellson: Yeah. Washington, D.C., had Don Lamond. It had Mert Oliver on bass, Angelo Tompros on tenor saxophones, and Earl Swope on trombone, Marky Markowitz on trumpet. These were all brilliant musicians. They had a small band together. They played Cavacas Grill. I knew Don Lamond way back then. He was a great player. I never heard him play with a big band. This was like an octet. Later on I caught him with Woody [Herman]'s band, and he blew me away. Sounded great. Technique was there. Sound was there. Able to listen. We're on a video together. There was a Steve Allen show featuring Lionel Hampton, Don Lamond, myself, and, I think, Mel Lewis. Was Mel Lewis on that one?

Kimery: No. This one – I just know the three of you. You started off playing on tomtoms?

Bellson: Right.

Kimery: And then migrated back to the drum set?

Bellson: That's right. I had forgotten completely about that until somebody brought it up to me. I said, "Send me a copy of the video." They did, and brought back good memories. Don Lamond was a great player.

Brown: How about Mel Lewis?

Bellson: Mel Lewis. When I first met him, he was getting ready to join Glenn Miller's band. He said, "I want to go to New York and learn how to play, because I want to play with a swing band." So he did. It didn't take him long, because he learned how to play. Great, musical drummer. Great. Buddy and I used to listen to what he did with the Thad Jones – Mel Lewis band. Incredible. He is an example of a drummer that put everything in the right spot. If it called for a two-bar break, he didn't put the kitchen sink in there with it. He made it sound like it belongs to that tune. That takes an artist. His playing ability, with Thad Jones writing arrangements, and Mel Lewis – that band was on fire, and Mel Lewis had a great part of that. Great musical drummer. Great.

Brown: Did we forget anybody? Is there anyone else you want to talk about, that either you find to be interesting or inspiring or through the ages . . .? I know we talked a lot about a lot of different drummers, but coming from you, that's the voice of authority, so . . .

Bellson: We missed J. C. Heard, didn't we?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Brown: J. C. Heard.

Bellson: He played with Jazz at the Philharmonic, early years. J. C. Heard. We used to call him Mr. Clean, because he always dressed up in fabulous suits and shirts and neckties. He looked like he just came out of a – my brother said, “That guy’s taking a screen test.” He was like Duke. Duke always was immaculate. Even his casual clothes were immaculate.

A great drummer. He worked with Cab’s band for a while. He was a great soloist and great timekeeper. He was in a class with Shadow Wilson – all those drummers during that period. Cozy Cole.

Brown: Talk a little bit more about Cozy.

Bellson: Cozy.

Brown: Yeah, because this generation doesn’t know, but we hear *Topsy*. We know.

Bellson: The only drummer to create – make a record that sold over a million copies. The only drummer that sold. *Topsy no.1* and *Topsy no.2*. Nobody came close. Gene recorded *Drum Boogie*. Buddy did *Hallelujah* with Tommy’s band. I did *Skin Deep*. But never did we reach the million mark. He’s the only drummer that sold over a million records. He even topped that young kid that was on the Disney program.

Brown: Sandy Nelson?

Bellson: Sandy Nelson.

Brown: Doing *Wipeout*.

Bellson: He sold a lot – quite a few records. But *Topsy*, that’s something.

But he was a great drummer too. He knew how to play the snare drum. When I say that, I mean, a lot of drummers play just the cymbals for time. Very few drummers can do what Baby Dodds did, playing press rolls and make it swing, not make it sound too militaristic. That’s why, when Gene Krupa learned how to play drums, his influence was Baby Dodds. He wasn’t going to be a drummer. He was studying to be a priest. When he heard Baby Dodds, he looked up, held his hands, and said, “Lord, I’ll be with you shortly, but right now I’m interested in Baby Dodds and playing drums.” He told me that. Gene told me that. [?] could play the snare drum.

Brown: George Wettling?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: George Wettling could play the snare drum. So, the one we just talked about . . .

Brown: Cozy?

Bellson: Cozy. Cozy could play the snare drum. He could play press rolls so it didn't sound like a press roll. It swung. He was a great reader. In fact he and Gene got together and had a drum studio together for years. Gene says he learned an awful lot from Cozy about rudiments, being able to read.

Cozy always knocked me out. He had that rich, low voice. Later on he went to Columbus, Ohio. I think he came from Columbus – somewhere in Ohio. He went to teach at Capital University. I stopped off on one of my tours to see him. I walked in the room, and he had about a group of 20 drummers. He was giving a lecture. I could hear that low, resonant sound, beautiful sounding voice of his. He was explaining something, not about drums, but he was telling all these young drummers, “You’ve got to learn how to do one thing. When you’re playing theaters, that’s four shows a day. That means that you don’t have to go out and ball some chick for three shows and come back to start to play the fourth show. You don’t have that kind of energy. You’ve got to forget those chicks and relate to the drumming.” I said, “You dirty old man, you.” He laughed. Said, “I’m telling the truth.”

Brown: As long as we’re talking about the educating drummers, did you know Alan Dawson?

Bellson: Alan, a champion. A champion all the way. Beautiful drummer. He did something I’ve never seen anybody ever do, at a clinic. Picks a set of brushes and goes through all the rudiments, playing brushes, while he’s playing a samba beat with the bass drum, da-dum, da-dum, da-dum, da-dum. That’s constant, and he goes through all the rolls, all the flams, ratamacues, playing brushes on the snare drum. That’s a work of art. That alone, right there, puts him in a class by himself. Great teacher and a marvelous player. Could play with a small band, big band. Alan Dawson was something else.

Brown: Tony Williams’s teacher.

Bellson: Tony Williams’s teacher, yeah. Among a lot of other students that I know. I had a chance to know him very well. He was something else.

Brown: How about Joe Morello?

Bellson: Joe Morello. When I first met him, I was with Duke’s band. We were playing a place called Holyoak, Massachusetts, near Boston. Because he’s from Boston, isn’t he?

Brown: Yeah. He’s from that area.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: He said, “How do you do that thing with the left hand, with a finger over here and a finger over here. How do you do that?” I said, “I’ll show you some day, the finger style of playing, using your fingers along with the wrist and arm.” The next year, or six months later, I came again with Tommy Dorsey – with Duke. We were able to go to his house. He had two sets of – had two pads set up in his living room. I went over to his house for dinner. He picked up the sticks. He says, “Is this what you mean, Lou?” Brrrr. He started doing this. I said, “Why, you dirty rat, you. You knew it already.” He was doing it already. He said, “Yeah, I was studying photos of you and Buddy. I noticed you were using this finger in the left hand, and this finger over here.” So I showed him a few more things, and I said, “I don’t need to show you anything. In fact I’m jealous of the way that you’re playing now. You’re playing too good now as it is.” Good player. Great player. Great touch on the instrument. That *Take 5* thing that he did is among the classics, definitely. Another guy that can play good in a small group or a big band. Can do the whole thing.

Brown: How about going back and looking at some of the classic drum teachers: Billy Gladstone. Did you know him?

Bellson: Yeah. Billy Gladstone. I have a snare drum that he made for me. It’s a solid maple shell, three-ways key. You tighten everything at the top, nothing from the bottom. Beautiful hand drum. It’s now in a museum, somewhere up here in San Francisco. I can’t think of the guy – an Italian guy, got it from me. It starts with an F. I’ll think of his name too. He collects snare drums.

Brown: I know who you’re talking about, but his name doesn’t come to mind either.

Bellson: Billy Gladstone came in to hear me play. I was with Tommy Dorsey’s band at the hotel in New York. He said, “I’m going to make a snare drum for you.” I said, “Great.” He brought it in for me to play. It had gut snares on the bottom. When I put that snare drum on, it was during a radio broadcast. The whole Tommy Dorsey band turned around and said, “What was that?” That was how good that snare drum sounded. For an average guy in a band, what do they know about a snare drum? They know it’s a snare drum, and that’s as far as it goes. But to hear something played, and turn around and say, “What was that?” “Man, what a sound that was.” That was a Billy Gladstone snare drum.

I also had a chance – Buddy Rich and I walked in Radio City Music Hall and the Roxy to see Billy Gladstone. He was standing in the pit. You could see him from his waist on up. He had his snare drum really high. He was making this sound. On stage is 40 gorgeous girls with tights. You focused on that enough. That’s enough to drive you crazy. In the pit is Billy Gladstone playing these up-strokes and down-strokes. We went – Buddy Rich – both of us went from the 40 girls – zap – to the snare drummer. That’s how powerful he was. We forgot about the 40 girls. What is this guy doing over here with that snare drum?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

That's what's important. That's how good he played. Great artist. In fact, he was one of the Four Horsemen. They called them the Four Horsemen: Billy Gladstone, Max Manne – Shelly Manne's father – the tympany player . . .

Brown: Sol Goodman? Vic Firth? Sol Goodman? No?

Bellson: No.

Brown: Vic Firth? Oh, even before that.

Okay. Let's go on to the fourth one.

Bellson: Yeah, Max Manne. Oh – Carl Glassman. He was a tympani player. And then the snare drummer – oh, Murray Spivack. Yeah, Murray Spivack. There was – first of all, there was – who else?

Brown: Billy Gladstone.

Bellson: Billy Gladstone, Max Manne, Carl Glassman, and Murray Spivack. Whenever it came time for something to come up to do special, they called one of those guys. They were all excellent, what they did.

Brown: How about Jim Chapin?

Bellson: Jim Chapin. [?] a story about him. I got a phone call from Jimmy Chapin. This was long after he wrote that book *Independence*, which is a marvelous book, by the way. That book is as good as the one I wrote – better, because he gets into the drum set. After that book came out, he was doing a lot of teaching out of that book. He called me up frantically one day. Said, "I'm in trouble." I said, "What's the matter?" He said, "I just got a job to fill for somebody with Woody Herman's band." "So, that's great. What's wrong with that?" He said, "What should I do?" Then I started to get my brain going. I know what he was after. "You're so used to teaching exercises, and you haven't been playing with a small band or a big band. You're concentrating on students and playing all these two-bar phrases, four-bar phrases, that you can't think of anything else to play. You got to forget that book that you wrote and listen to the band and groove and swing." He did. He made it, but otherwise, he would have been thinking, "Let me see. I'm reading the music. Here comes a four-bar break. Should I use 187 in my book or . . ." No. You can't do that. I said, "Jimmy. You got to forget that." He never forgot that.

Brown: It's great advice.

Bellson: Great technician, even today. He's 85 years old – something like that. He still carries a practice pad and sticks. He goes in the bathroom with it.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Brown: You see him every year at IAJE. He's got his little pad on his knee – rrrrrrrrrrrrr.

Bellson: Yeah, he's got it. Great clinician, inspiration.

Brown: How about Charlie Wilcoxson?

Bellson: Charlie Wilcoxson.

Brown: That's where Papa Jo [Jones] always said, "Oh yeah. Everything's out of Charlie Wilcoxson."

Bellson: He was a great teacher. In fact, Charlie Wilcoxson. I'm a Yankee ballplayer fan. I'm a Yankee fan, for years. Pearl used to go up to Yankee Stadium and sing the *Star-Spangled Banner*. I got to know George Steinbrenner. George Steinbrenner was a drummer when he was younger, and he took lessons from Charlie Wilcoxson. At that time, Charlie Wilcoxson had a giant picture of me, and each student that came in there had to face that portrait. So when I met George Steinbrenner, he said to me, "I had to look at your ugly puss every time I took a lesson." I said, "If you need a second baseman on your team, call me. I'll come and do it." That's the story. His family was into shipbuilding. They were very wealthy. But he loved baseball. The Yankees didn't do so good this year. I was going to call George Steinbrenner about it, but I said I better not. He'll probably say, "I'm going back to playing drums again." But he was a drummer years ago.

Brown: About Ted Reed and his book *Syncopation*? Is it Ted Reid? Have I got that name right?

Kimery: Yeah.

Bellson: Yeah, Ted. Teddy Reed, yeah. Good. That's a good book.

Brown: That's who – I studied with a student of Alan Dawson: Copeland – Keith Copeland. So I went through the – that's called the ritual, when you get down to the – you play the samba, and you play all the rudiments. But we also worked out of *Syncopation*. He said, "This is what Alan Dawson would do." You go through and read it, and you play with this, or you play with the bass drum, you play with the hi-hat.

Bellson: That's right.

Brown: It's an important book.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: That's a good book. Ted's a good teacher too. I got to know him quite well. Even when he moved on from New York to Florida, I'd see him quite often. Good. Nice man.

Brown: Morris Goldenberg? Do you know him?

Bellson: I knew of him. I didn't – I met him once. I'm not too familiar – I'm familiar with his work, and his students all came out – didn't Joe Morello study with him?

Brown: Yeah. He taught a lot of folks.

Bellson: There's one guy in Chicago that was very influential, a big influence on me too. He wrote books that were the size of a video. Eddie Strait. You know about him?

Brown: I know the name.

Bellson: Ed Strait. He was like Roy Knapp in Chicago. I took a few lessons from him too. He was sharp. Older guy. He wrote these little books with a lot of material, great material, in them. Not so much with a set of drums, but playing the instrument as – per se.

Brown: We were looking in your stack of books there, and we came across *Stick Control*. George Lawrence Stone.

Bellson: Yeah. Murray Spivack took me through that book. I thought I was a good player before I went to study with Murray Spivack. Somebody recommended him. I went up to see him in North Hollywood. He said, "Okay." He says, "I want you to play for me on a practice pad." He said, "Play me a single-stroke roll. Open it up, and then close it. Play me a five-stroke roll. Seven-stroke roll. Play me a flam. Flam accent." This went on for about a half hour. Then he said, "See that chair over there. Go sit down." So I sat down. He said, "When I finally get the boards off your hands, I'll make a good player out of you." I said, "Oh." I've been looking for this guy for a long time. I thought I played well. He took me through my paces. I studied off and on, on and off with him for a couple of years. Maintained a friendship right up until he passed away. He was a great teacher, great player. Did you see that video that's out, where he's giving me a lesson? A big picture of him in the front. It says, "Murray Spivack giving Louie Bellson a lesson." What he did was, we went to the basics. He said, "Just play a single for me." So I did this. I did a up-stroke and down-stroke. He said, "No, no, no, no, no, no. That's not right. Just play the right and left hand." All he wanted was a tap. So he's chastising me, and I left it on the video. I said, "No. Leave it on the video. It's a lesson." Dave Garibaldi's also on that, because he studied with Murray too.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

You know something? You're going to preach – you guys are both drummers. As a young kid, I was puzzled by the rudiments. I was all for them, because I knew that I went to Battle Creek, Michigan, for three straight years and won competitions – first-class competitions – on the parade drum with gut snares. So I know about rudiments. But naming the rudiments always puzzled me, because I was taught, like you guys, a stroke is when you employ the use of the full arm, wrist, and everything. That's a stroke. A tap is when you use the wrist only. So when you tell me to play a five-stroke roll, I'm going to go 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5. Right? When it's a number 5 roll, it's a two-bounce tap roll. A bounce is one attack and two sounds, as in ta-da ta-da tum, ba-da ba-da bum, ba-da ba-da. So when you tell me to play a five-stroke roll, I went – I showed that to Murray – Murray Spivak. He said, "Why you little rascal you. Where'd you think about that?" So I came out with the road chart, showing the number 7 roll is three bounces and a tap. Technically, that's what it is. I showed that to Steve Gadd. Steve Gadd said, "You're right. You're completely right. I never thought of that." But I thought of it. I pat myself on the back.

Brown: What would you tell – I don't know if you're taking on any younger students, but what kind of advice would you give to a young student? Say a junior-high school kid comes up to you and says, "Oh, Mr. Bellson. I just started playing drums. What can you tell me?"

Bellson: First of all, find a good teacher, a teacher that's a drummer that knows the instrument, because that's important, because in my career as a clinician with big bands, I noticed that some of the leaders of those bands didn't know beans about drums. That's why – that one thing that I told you about Clark Terry and I went. They were playing [Bellson sings *In the Mood* in a straight rhythm]. That bandleader should have known better to teach the kids to play that way. He should have taught them to play [Bellson sings the melody with a swing rhythm]. Swing. The drummer knew how to do it, but the bandleader didn't know how to do it.

Getting back with the teaching: go to a great, prominent teacher, one that has experience and knows drums. Second of all, he's going to teach you how to play the first two basic rudiments: the single-roll and the long-roll, because all the other 24 or 25 rudiments are based on a combination of a single and a long roll. Learn the rudiments, the flams, ratamacues, and then learn how to read. Learning how to read is simple. Too many young drummers during that time made a big production out of – "That's too difficult for me. That's too hard." No. Nothing's hard. It's not difficult. Notes on a paper are nothing. You have to make them come to life. They're dead. They're nothing but some ink and paper. You have to make them come – when you read, you have to play the notes, not read the notes. Reading the notes is not performing the notes, because they're not – they don't have a heart. There's something on the paper. You have to play the notes. I learned that from my dad. He'd get a clarinet player. He'd say, "Play this four-bar break for me." The kid would read it. My dad would say, "You read it, but I didn't get anything out of you.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Now play it with feeling.” He played it with feeling, and what a difference, from reading the notes and playing the notes.

We as drummers – when we play in a big band, one of the most important guys in the band is the lead trumpet player, because if you and the lead trumpet player are together, you’re going to make the phrases, because the lead trumpet player is going to teach other trumpet players to play up to him, and the lead saxophone is going to learn to play – if Bobby Shew’s the lead trumpet player, that’s why he likes Steve Gadd so much. Steve is always listening to him, playing [Bellson sings a phrase]. They’re together. If they’re not together, it’s not going to sound good. So they have to learn that too.

Also, they have to have patience. Don’t just learn one beat. Like today – my brother teaches. Little kids walk in, “All I want to learn is” [Bellson sings a hard-rock rhythm]. “That’s all.” My brother says, “No. That’s not going to learn how to play drums. That’s only one little part.” “That’s all I want to learn. I want to play the gig.” They don’t have the patience, the time, to really get into the instrument, to learn how to play the instrument. How to get a sound out of the instrument takes a few years, just to hit the snare drum right to get the ultimate sound. Not talking about the bass drum. That comes in later. But don’t try to get a full set of drums with the first lesson. Learn to play the snare drum first. Have patience. Listen to records. Learn how to swing, as well as rock-and-roll. They’re two different feels. One’s a strict eighth-note feel. One is a rolling triplet feel. That’s some of the few things I teach – I do with my students.

I had Steve Gadd ask me last week when I saw him – he said, “I haven’t” – He’d just come off a tour of doing about 27 clinics. That’s a lot of clinics, and it’s just him alone. I do sometimes with a trio or with a big band, which eases the pressure. Steve said, “What do you do?” I said I come out. I play first. I do my clinic. I play something first. Not long – short. Then I explain what I just did is a combination of a single and long roll. Then I get the snare drum out and play something with the snare drum. Then I get the brushes out and play with the snare drum alone. Then I go back to the drum set. I show the students what I did on *50 Ways to Leave Your Lover*. Then I begin the question and answer period. I know some of the kids want to ask questions. Then I wind up by playing a long solo. I told him. I said, “That’s great.”

He did something unique. He opened a session. They announced it. “Steve Gadd.” He came out, sat down, picked up the brushes, and put the microphone this close. [Bellson makes the sound of a brushed swing rhythm]. Slow beat. Then he started singing. [Bellson sings the melody of *Bye Bye Blackbird*]. He sang a whole chorus while he’s playing the brushes. Simple. I guess a lot of those little kids were wondering, what is that? But when it comes down to – he’s breaking it down, completely down. The tempo – instead of coming out like a fireball – which is good. That’s what I do – here’s another approach. Then he started building. Put the brushes down, picked up the sticks, and started going higher, higher. The intensity started going. Now they know why he’s Steve

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Gadd. He started doing all these things. He went back to the brushes, then back to the sticks, and the questions and the answers. He wound up playing a fabulous solo. So there's another thing – another way of doing it.

Kids have to learn how to be patient. They have to know where they came from in order to know where they're going. By that I mean, they have to know about Baby Dodds. They have to know about Chick Webb. They have to know about Max Roach, about Kenny Clarke. They have to know about Buddy Rich, Gene Krupa, Shelly Manne. Bring it up to date, and let's talk about the Dave Weckls and the Dennis Chambers.

Then listen to some of these youngsters too, like this young Holmes kid. They've got two players. One, his name is Thomas Lang. You know about him?. He comes from Vienna, Austria. The other is Virgil Donati. Both of these guys are fabulous. They're doing stuff with their feet that I would do with my hands. My question after that is, how do they sound in a band? That's the key. You can be the greatest technician in the world, but I want to hear you play in the band. I want to hear you play behind a trumpet player, behind a saxophone player. I want to hear what you do on the out chorus. I want to hear how musical you are. That's number one. Then the technique and drum solo can come next. These are things that some of the kids learn as they grow. Those that stick with it, they come to realize, yeah, that's right.

Have patience, because that title, "world's greatest," bothers me. There's nobody that's the world's greatest. They used that for me for a while. They used it for Buddy Rich. I said, no. I'm still learning, just like my students are. I've got my books. I don't stop where I think that I'm the world's greatest. Nobody's the world's greatest. How are you going to say that Max Roach isn't as good as Kenny Clarke? Or Buddy Rich is as good as Gene Krupa? They both have their thing that they do, monumental. Jo Jones. If I had to pick out one drummer – Buddy Rich and I were doing a seminar. The guy said, "We're going to put you guys on the spot. You have to name one guy that influenced you more than anybody else. You have to pick out one." It was Jo Jones. Buddy said it, and I said it, because he's compleat – not c-o-m-p-l-e-t-e. C-o-m-p-l-e-a-t. In the dictionary, that means complete – no questions about it.

The key to – you have to have patience. They're always going to – a good point having to do with Jo Jones. Ippolito in New York, had a drum school up on the six floor.

Brown: Sam [*sic*: Frank] Ippolito. I can't remember his first name, but I know who you're talking about. Yeah. Drummer's World? Is it up there? But I know where you – like on 47th Street.

Bellson: I believe – what's his first name?

Brown: That was Sam, but I might not be right. I've been, maybe. Anyway . . .

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: Anyway, I was up there with Mel Lewis. We were talking together. Ippolito said, “Wish you guys stick around a little bit, because Papa Jo’s coming in.” I said, “Oh yeah. I can stick around.” Mel said, “I can stick around too.” In the interim, there’s 20 young kids – little kids. Ippolito doesn’t mind if they get on the drums. Let them have a ball. Sounded like a war going on. Brrrr, brrrrr, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, brrrrr, brrrr. Can you imagine? 20 kids. Mel Lewis and I had to go in the office. We were waiting for Jo Jones. Jo finally came in. The doors are open in the elevator. Here comes Jo Jones, and here’s 20 kids with a war going on. Jo looked at them for about three minutes. He slowly walked over in between them, and he said, “STOP!” All the little kids, they didn’t know who he was. They looked at him. Jo Jones pulled out a brush – one of the old brushes that had a red knob on the end of it. You have one of those brushes? There was a cymbal in front of him. He went [Bellson sings a swing rhythm]. “That’s where it’s at.” The little kids scratched their heads. They went back, brrrrrrrrrrrr. They didn’t know what kind of lesson they were getting, listening to that great rhythm he gave them. Four bars. That’s enough to carry you for 20 years. The little kids went back to playing. Mel Lewis and I said, there it is, there it is. That’s something, isn’t it?

But bless their hearts, the kids today are extremely talented. They have access to things that we didn’t have. They have access to go see their favorite players, or see them on video, DVDs. They have that. The only thing that they’re missing is playing the theaters and ballrooms. That was something that the older guys got that was really something. It really made you into a great player. But today the kids are younger. Some are seven, eight years old, nine years old, playing their little buns off, because they have more things to go by. They have good teachers. They have all that. They just have to learn that one word, “patience,” and listen. The world is fast enough as it is now, without having to play a fast single-stroke roll faster than you can ride a Mercedes down a street. The challenge is there. I think the teachers have to instill that patience with the students too. They have to make them realize you have to take your time to learn how to play, and you’re going to be with it forever. Watching Steve Gadd play the other day, I picked up something I didn’t play. I’m 81 years old. I thought I’d heard everybody play. But I picked up something he did that I was going to use. That’s something. It shows you . . .

Brown: What was it? Do you remember what it was?

Bellson: Yeah.

Brown: What you got from Steve? What was it?

Bellson: It was the way he started that clinic . . .

Brown: Oh, okay.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center

Bellson: . . . with a slow tempo, and singing. His singing voice was beautiful. It was in time, like his playing. I've never seen that thing before. There again, he escalated into the other things, but the way he started was very unique, was different, made sense.

Kimery: Three minutes.

Brown: I was going to – cram it in – I was going to ask about the influence of other world drummers, say, either Latin percussionists or say somebody like a tablā player like Zakir Hussein – these other types of percussion. Did that have any influence? Or do you keep your ears broad to listen to those folks as well?

Bellson: Oh yeah.

Brown: Like Giovanni Hidalgo or Francisco Aguabella or any – in your area, you had Chano [Pozo]. You had all the great ones coming up.

Bellson: That's a good point. Norman Granz called me one day, years ago. He said, "I want you to make a record with some drummers." I said, "Norman, I've already recorded with Buddy and Gene and Cozy and Max." "Oh no," he says, "I want you to get together with – what's the name of that one guy that you know very well? Walfredo de los Reyes, Sr. He lives up here." I said, "Yeah. I know him very well." He said, "I want you to get together with him and a whole bunch of Latin players, and you can do a CD" – no – "an LP." I called Walfredo. He said, "The timing is perfect. What are you doing next Sunday? Because next Sunday I'm going to Las Vegas," because he played with Wayne Newton for years. "I'm going to Vegas Sunday. Alex Acuña is going to be there. Walfredo, Jr., is going to be there. Louis Conte is going to be there. Francisco Aguabella is going to be there, playing the bata drum. Cachao is going to be there as the bass player." Am I naming them for you?

Brown: Oh yeah. You got them.

Bellson: When Dizzy saw that lineup, he said, "Wow." They were all there together. Walfredo said, "We want you to play with us." I said, "Oh no. I'm not in that league. I'll listen." They started playing. It was like listening to a symphony orchestra. Clare Fischer was the keyboard player, who's a genius as far as Latin things are concerned. You can imagine him and Cachao and all these other guys on the same record. They gave me a little drum to bang on. The CD is out. It's called *Ecue* – e-c-u-e. They're all on it. It's a fabulous – the other guy on it was Emil Richards, playing vibes, who is also another great drummer. All these artists were together. I don't know why that never took off. Dizzy said, "Man, this thing is a work of art." It's like, everybody should own that. There's a guy in London that likes Latin music. When he saw that LP, he said, "How did you manage . . ." I said, "I didn't manage it. Walfredo did." Manolo Badrena was playing the cabaxa – is on it also. [?] name all the guys.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Brown: We're stopping now.

Bellson: I hope you can get that LP. It's out on CD and also a DVD – no, it's on a CD and a tape.

[recording interrupted]

Brown: . . . interview, talking about the influence of Latin percussion and world percussion. We were talking about the *Ecue* project. That's something we're going to run right out and get. How about any other types of percussion? Indian percussion, like with Ali Raka, with Ravi Shankar or his son Zakir Hussein, or any other types? Or African percussion. You talked about the Latin percussion, with bata. How about – did you know Olatunji?

Bellson: Yes. I respected the tablā players, the Indian – in fact Steve Smith is really into that now. Eddie Shaughnessy was into that for quite a long time, Indian music. Emil Richards went to India to study and also buy instruments for his work as a motion-picture percussionist. I respect that. I haven't really gotten into it like I should, but I might want to listen to quite a bit of it, because I know, watching some of the tablā players and Ravi Shankar – I went to a couple of his concerts. The tablā player was fantastic. Their complicated rhythm is 4/4. They played 33 and 1/3 over 16 very easily. There's a joke about that. Some Indian players were getting ready to do a gig. One guy says to the other guy, "I've got a difficult job to do tonight. I have to play something in 4/4. How do you do that?" Yet he can turn around and play 33 over 14. Wow. It's fantastic. Of course they grew up that way. I respect that kind of playing entirely.

I went to Africa twice. I had a chance to listen to some of the drummers from Ghana. They floored me. Not only what they played, but the sound. We try to take a tom-tom made over there and bring it over here, in a different climate, and expect it to sound like that. But one of the drummers over there told me, you can't do that. It's like wine. You take wine from Montefiascone out of Rome and bring it over here. It don't taste like it does where the grape came from. That's technical. I would say that – where was I now?

Brown: We're talking about the Indian drummers, and we're talking about the African drummers. You were talking about hearing the Ghanaian drummers.

Bellson: I went with Pearl. They came out. Seven young drummers from Ghana came out. One guy – they came out one at a time. One guy came out holding a big stick, and he hit the ground with it. Another guy came out and had bells around his ankles. Seven different rhythms going on. I never heard anything like that.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Their drums – the way that they play, and that climate – we can't match that. Cozy brought over – played on a drum from Africa once, but he said it didn't sound like the kids played it, coming from Africa. That climate. Fabulous drummers.

I'm going to get into the Indian thing. I've been studying with that DVD that Steve Smith put out. He gets into a lot of that. He's made it a must for him to study about drummers all over the world. I respect that. That's something.

Brown: We were talking about Remo Belli and Remo Drum Company earlier. I was working with San Jose Taiko right down the street here, and Remo was sending them the prototypes of some Taiko drums. How about the Japanese drummers, like Koto? Have you seen that group? It's amazing.

Bellson: Oh yeah. Fabulous. They're in [Las] Vegas now. They got a two-year contract with Taiko. It's all they do, is play on that show. It's tremendous drumming.

Brown: It's like a martial art, huh? – the way – all the movement. There's a real discipline to that art form as well.

Bellson: Yeah. These guys aren't big, muscle-bound – they're regular guys, but their knowledge of ki, akido, takes them – they can play – like they break boards and cement blocks. The power of the ki is fabulous for those taiko drummers. That's something else.

Brown: I'm going to read another quote. This one – of course we're going back to the book of Duke – this one's *The World of Duke Ellington*, Stanley Dance. This is an interview with – well, let's see if you recognize who this is from. I'll read it – I'll go ahead and identify it. You know who it is: Jeff Castleman.

Bellson: Stanley Dance?

Brown: Yeah, Stanley Dance, but I'm going to read an interview that was conducted with Jeff Castleman. This is what Jeff says: "I really enjoy playing with Louis." He didn't call you Louie. He called you Louis Bellson. "I like the atmosphere in a small group better, but Louis made the big band relaxed for me. He played so well that I never worried." It sounds like you and Duke. "He's a nice guy, an angel, and it was a wonderful experience. He opened my eyes to how nice the business could be, that you could be a nice guy and play well too. I learned so much from him that I progressed a lot further than I would have otherwise." So here again your influence, the extra-musical influence.

Bellson: That's Jeff Castleman?

Brown: Jeff Castleman.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Bellson: The bass player.

Brown: Yeah.

Bellson: Right back I'd say the same thing. I found him easy to work with. He had the right attitude. We were playing great music. We worked together. You can't beat that combination, working together. If you have a problem, you solve it right there. Don't let it ride over and be a part of your ugly side. Do what you have to do, and do it the best you can. That's what he did. He was a good bass player too. I saw him not too long ago. They had a get-together of all the people that worked with Duke. Singers – Herb Jeffries was there. 93 years old and still singing – still got the voice.

Brown: Bronze Buckaroo.

Bellson: Joya Sherill was there, and Louis Prima. Milt Grayson, who just passed away, was there. Butch Ballard was there, still playing at 85. I'm not the only one at 81. If he's 85 and still playing, I've got to catch up with him. That's another good drummer. Also, I had a chance to play opposite – another great drummer, played with Dizzy for a long time – from Philadelphia – I'll go down the alphabet now.

Brown: I'm just trying to think. Played with Dizzy.

Bellson: Played with Dizzy.

Brown: Ignacio Berroa was playing with him for a long time.

Bellson: No.

Brown: Earlier? In the early days?

Bellson: Mickey . . .

Kimery: Mickey Roker.

Bellson: Mickey Roker, yeah..

Brown: Yeah, Philly. That's right.

Bellson: Mickey Roker. Great player.

Brown: Played with Bags [Milt Jackson] a lot too.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bellson: Underrated. All these guys are underrated. Mickey Roker. He's a great player. We had a thing going on about Norman Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic. Mickey and I were the two drummers. We wound up playing fours. He made me stand up and take notice. Yes he did. Had the right attitude. Nice man. We had fun together.

Brown: You seem to be in the league, if not at the top drawer of the league, of people who, when somebody thinks of somebody who's a nice person, as gentleman, as you've been described by both Duke Ellington and Jeff Castleman, as an angel, a saint. Has that worked against you in this business? You see all these abrasive people who make their reputation on being rough and tough, like Buddy Rich or Benny Goodman and other folks like that. Do you think it was a disadvantage? Do you think that works as a disadvantage, to be nice in this business? You're obviously rare folks.

Bellson: No, because I learned at an early age from my father, you can get more out of a plum if you don't eat it right away. Wait until it gets ripe. I learned – how can you not be a nice person if you played with all those people you mentioned in the book. If you hung out with Louis Armstrong for a long time – there's an example of a guy that everybody loved. He never had a bad word to say about anybody. Everybody loved him. Trumpet players loved him. Everybody. How do you put him in a category of a guy that was nice, and how'd he get along? He got along because, when you were in the room with him, you became nice like him. What rubbed off on you was the fact that you were with Louis Armstrong for five minutes.

I had something else in mind too, that answers your question. Having been brought up with all these artists, you have to be a nice person. Buddy Rich – I played a lot of clinics where he had been there before me, and they said, "Don't mention that guy's name." Or I've been to a lot of clinics where he had been there before me, and the guy said, "Boy, was he ever nice. He gave me a whole set of drums, he took my son out to lunch, and he let me ride in the bus for a couple of days." So there you are. I know that guy for 50 years, and I've seen him do things that were wonderful. I always chastised him when he did something that wasn't so wonderful. I said, "What did you do that for?" "That's" – he said – waved it off.

I had the pleasure of doing something in London years ago. They had a drummers' club there – 500 drummers. Buddy was one of the presidents, I was one of the presidents, and Kenny Clare was one of the presidents. Great drummer. I had received my silver platter, and so did Kenny. Buddy had not received his. We were both in London, and the drummer club guy called me up and said, "Lou, Buddy hasn't received his silver platter yet. How about you presenting it to him in front of the 500 drummers?" I said, "Yeah. Okay." We got there. Buddy was sitting there. I stood up. Had the silver platter in my hand. I said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I want to present this silver platter to the only guy I know that can walk into an empty room and start an argument." He looked at me and said, "I was supposed to be the comedian." I said, "Never mind. Here's your silver

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



platter.” It just came out that way. In fact Stan Irwin, who we talked about was the manager for Pearl – he was a stand-up comic for years – he stole that line from me. I gave him that line. He says, “That’s great,” because he managed Buddy for a while, so he knew him. But even a guy like Buddy, some of the guys in the band still had to say some good things about him. He yelled and screamed, but for a purpose. He didn’t want anybody to play under what he does. When he goes on the bandstand, he gives it more than 100%. “That’s what I want my band to do. They want to do what I do: give over 100%.” So at first maybe they get mad at him. Later on they say, yeah, what I learned from that – I learned something – took lessons from that – learn how to play your best, no matter what. I had to use that when I played with that lousy drum set in Venice. I had to sit there and smile, say, “Lord, you’re giving me a test, so I’ll get through it.” I got through it. I don’t want to go through it again, but I got through it.

Brown: Did you have any more experiences that you look back on and say, whew, I’m glad that was the only time I had to deal with that one?

Bellson: No. Actually I was very fortunate that all the other experiences were just fabulous. That’s the one experience that I made up my mind, before I die, I want to go back there and see if the experience was still living, and I want to set up my drums and play for them, let them know I could still play.

Brown: You mentioned Pops. You had a chance to work with Pops. What was that like? Louis Armstrong.

Bellson: Wonderful. Great. He was an example of a guy – I never heard a bad word about him at all. Never. He made you feel like you – when you first meet him, he made you feel like you’re brothers, like you’ve known him for years. Down to earth. Bing Crosby loved him. Ella loved him. Pearl loved him. Presidents loved him. He did more going to Europe than the politicians ever [?] from Congress. He went over there, played one number, and made everybody come together. Louis Armstrong. When they talk about him, they talk about the beginning and the end. For me to have a chance to play – record with him and Ella together, and to play with Pops.

I had an experience in Las Vegas at the Hilton Hotel. They had Louis Armstrong’s band and Pearl Bailey together. So our dressing rooms were together. Open the door, and there’s Louis. All that time we belonged together, Pearl was trying to get me to do a hobby – paint or do something besides drumming. “Why don’t you learn to do something else?” The three of us were walking from the dressing room to the stage together: Pops, Pearl, and myself. I was Little Louie, he was Big Louie, and Pearl was Pearl. So Pearl would say to Big Louie, “Big Louie, why don’t you teach Little Louie a hobby or something? He’s into drums. That’s great. But health wise, he should do something different.” So all that time for three weeks, Pops would shake his head and say “Yeah, oh yeah” in that growling voice, “Yeah yeah yeah.” Finally, during the last day, she said –

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Pearl said to Louis Armstrong on the way to the stage, “Did you come up with something, Louie?” He says, “I don’t know, Pearl. All I need is my trumpet, a bottle of booze, and a young chick. That’s all.” Pearl wouldn’t talk to either one of us. That was Louis Armstrong. I said, “Big Louie, you said the wrong thing. I’m in the doghouse with you. I’ll see you after the show.”

During all this, humor was a big factor in a career of someone like I am. Humor, as well as artistry, having faith in what you do, playing for Presidents, playing for people all over the world, instilling your idea of what love is all about. Music carries you through sadness, through happiness, and humor plays a big part of that. We were able to go with the blows. If something happened to your family, we learned how to deal with it and carry on. All those things were very obvious with all the people we mentioned in this taping – the fact that they had humor. They learned how to cry as well as smile through objects. Can you imagine just let alone to know the obstacles that Ellington had working on the road in those early years? That’s something right there. But they were great enough to hurdle over those obstacles and come out shining like a rose. So that’s one of the other big factors I learned. That’s why I say I was fortunate to be able to play with all those great artists, because I had – it rubbed off on me. It rubbed off on Clark Terry. Anybody that worked with Duke had to have that kind of feeling for him. So today – you notice I don’t – you mention Duke’s name. All these different things come up, because he was such a giver, such a great man, that you use his name in happiness, in sadness, in humor, or in dignity, in life. Can’t beat that.

Brown: Do you think the music of today that we know as jazz – do you think it still contains all those elements?

Bellson: I think that jazz today is good. It’s good. The young players, like the college students – I could name some college bands that are fantastic. They can take my whole book, and they’ll play it. A lot of the young players, like Nicholas Payton, trumpet player – if Louis Armstrong were living, he’d say, “Yeah. He’s got it.” I know Nicholas Payton. I’ve played with him. Joshua Redman, saxophone player. Michael Brecker. Randy Brecker. I could name a whole bunch of young players that are into jazz.

The word “jazz” – Duke never liked to use that word too much. He used to say, “Jazz is beyond category.” When you say that, that means, “good music.” He typified music as good music and bad music. We play good music. Bad music is something that doesn’t relate to music at all. It’s not even carnival music, because carnival music is great too. He always said, “Jazz is beyond category.” You can’t categorize it. It’s played by different people all over the world. It’s played by people who have a different idea of what jazz is. They play it, because they don’t realize what they’re doing. They know they’re playing American music, but it’s different than – they cop a few riffs and do it themselves. That’s tough to explain, because you’ve got young players today that are grabbing a hold of beyond category and bringing it up to another level. You can imagine the trumpet players

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

that listen to Dizzy that are playing today, like Jon Faddis. They're bringing it up to the present and going beyond that. That's the best way I can describe it.

Brown: I teach at the university. All three of us are involved in music education as well. One of the things that I recognized, or noticed, about some of the younger generation today is, yes, they have incredible technical facility, but they don't understand the love and the spirituality that goes into the music. They learn all the chops. They learn all their technique, but there's the essence of the music that I think that you were alluding to earlier, about what keeps the music vibrant, what keeps it strong and inspirational. The people are good people. The music somehow instills in them a sense of humanity, and I don't hear that thread continuing, because now the majority of people playing jazz aren't learning it in the clubs and learning it from a master to a pupil. They're learning it in the academic environment.

Bellson: That's right.

Brown: I think some of that is being lost. Just like you said, this one example of this teacher who didn't teach them how to swing. They didn't teach them the essence of the music. They just taught them what the notes would sound like if they were played strict, without any sense of interpretation or with any background or fleshing out the music. This is something I've noticed, and I was wondering if this is something you've noticed as well.

Bellson: That's a good analogy. I go way back to when me and the Rendevous Club with a quartet. I played with them every Tuesday night. After I did that for two or three years, I was ready to go join Benny Goodman's band. I was ready to swing, because I knew what swing was all about. I knew what was playing – the saxophone player, playing for a trumpet player, playing for a piano player. I gained all that knowledge. That enabled me to become where I am today. Then also the fact, what you brought up, the educational part of it. The young kids are being educated properly for music, but they don't know the spiritual part of jazz. They haven't – it's like Pearl used to say – when somebody was interviewing her, she'd say – the interviewer's say, "You always refer to 'join the club.' What do you mean by that?" She'd always use that when somebody was interviewing her that didn't know what they were saying – didn't know how to interview her. Then she'd finally say – the interview would say, "What do you mean by 'join the club'?" She said, "I can't tell you, because you haven't paid your dues yet." When you think about that – players have to pay their dues to reach a certain element. They have to go through the educational part, yes, but you have to – you're not going to get that road experience too. You have to know what it was like to play in clubs and play with different players that have gone through all those obstacles which make them a great player.

Brown: I think this is what nurtured that humanity in the players in the past. It was the experience. It was the love that it took to play that music, that commitment. You had to

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



be dedicated, because, as you mentioned earlier throughout this interview, the insurmountable odds that the early players had to go through, yourself included. To bring 100% when you got on that stage despite having to stay in some flea-bag hotel, or not even be admitted to that part of town. All those kinds of experiences, that comes out in the music. What I see with the last couple generations of jazz students coming out of the institutions and academies is that information, that whole context of the music, is not being taught, or being inculcated, or being – they’re not being exposed to it. So they’re just learning all their technique, but I – when I listen to it, I don’t hear the humanity of the music. For me, then, we’re losing the music.

Bellson: That’s right. Another factor is – I remember Tony Bennett, who’s a dear brother. We’re like brothers. I call him every – like Clark Terry, same way. Every two weeks, Tony calls me or I call him. He was very close friends with Fred Astaire. Fred Astaire told Tony it took him ten years to learn how to walk from the backstage on the stage. Fred Astaire. It took him ten years to learn how to walk. [?]. But that’s right. In his early years, he practically stumbled on the stage, but then he learned how to walk on stage. Just that, without dancing. That’s something.

Brown: Since you brought up family, I wanted to talk – you mentioned your brother was also a teacher. Ken, off mike, we were talking about – did one of your brothers serve as your roadie? Or did he work with you? And which brother was that?

Bellson: What did my brother say? Oh, Tony Bennett.

Brown: No. You mentioned Tony as part of the family. But earlier today you mentioned that one of your brothers was a teacher. Was he a drum teacher?

Bellson: Oh yes, Henry.

Brown: Henry.

Bellson: He’s the baby in the family. And Tony. There were three drummers in the family: Tony, who lives in Arizona; and Hank is the baby – Hank lives in Encino; and myself. Hank teaches. He won’t take a student that wants to learn just a rock beat. He says, “You’ll have to go to someone else, because if you want to learn how to play drums, I’ll teach you, but you have to have patience.” Some of his patients were good players. One is Jason Harnell, who’s worked a lot of gigs down in L.A. Another one is Jeremy. Vic Feldman. You know Feldman? From London? A drummer and piano player. He had a son, Jeremy Feldman. Plays great drums. He followed – he took lessons from Hank for about five years. Good player.

The talent is out here. It’s got to be nurtured, and do what we did. Take step by step, and learn the process.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Brown: Those are invaluable words of wisdom. Is there anything else you want to make sure gets on the national record as far as the life and times of Louie Bellson, before we complete this interview?

Bellson: Learn how to take care of yourself, because at my age now, I wouldn't be playing if I was into drugs, alcohol, not getting my rest to take care of myself. I wouldn't be playing drums. I'd be wiped out. Drummers are like athletes. They have to have their hands and feet together. So I tell all the young – it's wonderful that they have health food stores now all over the country, where they didn't have that before, where young drummers are into health foods. Make sure they get their Cheerios for breakfast. Temper everything. I never was a drinker or a smoker. It was around me all my life, but I didn't do it, because I knew what I had to do. I had to keep my body in shape in order to play the drums the way I wanted to play. And I had fun doing it. While some of the guys were on the bus with a bottle of Jack Daniels whiskey, I was back there with a sack of apples. That felt just as good.

Brown: And you're still here, and they're not.

Bellson: Yeah. I'm still doing it. I had my apple this morning for breakfast.

Taking care of yourself, and making your craft something that's very sacred to you. We're all drummers, and we make our drumming sacred. It's something that we appreciate, we love, and we're still doing. I think that, with that thought in mind, if the kids can learn that, they'll be better off. At home, too. That word, respect – all three of us respect drumming, just like we respect our mothers and fathers. I look at television today and some of these sit-coms. I see the way the kids talk to their father. If I talked that way – first of all, I wouldn't think about it. Otherwise I'd be ten feet away, hanging on a hanger. I enjoyed having respect for them. Francine and I looked at this television show, Bernie Mac. Bernie Mac is very talented. He says it like it is. But his daughter – the way his daughter talks to him, I said, "Oh, my Lord." I can see my mother, if I talked to her – my mother – my father. I wouldn't be here. I'd be dead, buried, gone.

Brown: None of us would be here, talking to our parents like that.

Bellson: But that's lessons that we can all – they're basic lessons that all we have to do is do them, and you'd be miles ahead.

Brown: Seems like – from the example of your life, seems like, get a good partner, too.

Bellson: Oh yeah. That's right. Get a good – oh. I got two good partners. I didn't think Francine would come on the scene. I thought that was it, because 39 years with somebody strong as Pearl – there was some kind of lady. You don't go beyond that. The

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Lord gives you – I used to say, some guys don't even have a year of that with a partner, or two years. Here He's given me 39 years with a lady like that. Wow. Then here comes Francine. Just like Pearl. So when you get a blessing like that, a man gets twice, I've got to say, "You can take me home now. I've had my taste."

Brown: I think on that note, maestro Louis Bellson, I just want to say on behalf of the Smithsonian Institution, thank you very much for inviting us to your home to be able to share these thoughts, your memories and your life, to be captured for the national record. You are joined here by Anthony Brown and Ken Kimery, and we extend to you our deepest and most sincere gratitude to you and to Francine for your hospitality and to you for your contribution to American musical culture. Thank you so much.

Bellson: Thank you for allowing me to talk about my career and all my ups and downs. It's been my pleasure. Let's continue doing this. As long as we live, we can add more to it. Don't stop now.

Brown: On that note . . .

(transcribed and edited by Barry Kernfeld)

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

